

BACCANO!

2002 [Side A]: Bullet Garden

RYOHGO
NARITA



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BACCANO!

2002 [SIDE A]: BULLET GARDEN



RYOHGO NARITA
ILLUSTRATION BY KATSUMI ENAMI



The Din Inside Alveare

"Hey, Miria, look at the TV! It's the ship Ennis and the guys are on!"

"Ooh! You're right! Wooooow!"

"Boy, that is one huge boat! You could fit a hundred Yankee Stadiums on that!"

"Yes, it could hold a hundred people safely. It has the strength of a hundred!"

"That's astounding... You mean each one of those people has a Yankee Stadium all to themselves?!"

"Yes, what luxury! They can sleep all sprawled out!"

"You two haven't changed a bit; you call that a conversation? ...Wait, were you serious about that ship being on TV? I mean, this is you we're talking about. Don't tell me you confused a shed for the ship or something."

"It's true, Randy. That's the boat Firo's on. That's a whole lotta cameras; somethin' big goin' on?"

"C'mon, Pezzo, for real? ...Oh, yeah, that's for real. Man, oh man! That really is a classy boat. Ennis and Czes are one thing, but honestly, it's too good for Firo."

"Ennis was too good for Firo. He's lucky he got to marry her."

"Ain't that the truth. Ennis was like everybody's idol, after all."

"Well, maybe that's why it works, having her and Firo together."

"Hey, look up there on the deck! Isn't that Firo now?"

"Huh...? Bwa-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! Yeah, that's him! That's him, all right! Check it out; look what he's wearing... Damn, that looks lousy on him!"

"With high-def TVs, you can even see the little details in the background, can't you?"

"Hmm... You aren't impressed, seeing Firo and his family on TV? Well, never mind."

"We were pretty merciless when he was here, you know. If we keep making fun of him when he isn't here, too, it would just be cruel."

"Hmm. If he makes it home safely, I'd like to tease him again."

"If he makes it home safely? Don't tempt fate."

"I make a point of not seeing the future, you know. I look forward to finding out what happens, even if that uncertainty is a source of unease. Firo is a member of this family, after all. All I can do at this point is pray that the voyage is an uneventful one... Well, never mind."



Remarks from Mr. John Drox

"Perfect... Yes, perfect."

"To describe those two, the word *perfect* is just the thing!"

"They both have their quirks, but even those are perfectly placed—*perfect* easily covers everything! Not only that, but if they're both in one place, it's even more perfect! The two of them have no flaws, of course, but together each one's perfection complements the other's to create a new kind of perfect! It's wonderful! It's perfect!"

"If possible, I'd like them to grow through the medium of film. I mean that in a wholesome way, of course... Hey, come on, that was a joke, you know. Don't try to call the cops, please. Back to the point, if those two die, I'll shoot their biopic! A perfect movie that depicts the lives of two perfect people!"

"That said, those kids seem to be in perfect health, too. They could easily live to be a hundred and twenty. Man, guess that means I'd have to live to a hundred and fifty or so. Sheesh! Wouldn't it be great if someone discovered some sort of immortality drug before I died? That would make everything perfect!"

"All right, how many times have I used the word *perfect* now? You know, it's better not to call something perfect too many times if you really want to praise it. No one'll believe anything you say because they'll think you're shallow, like yours truly! Although I wouldn't call this belly of mine shallow! Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! Whoops! I forgot to mention it, but those two also have perfect looks. I bet they'll have trouble choosing spouses in the future. It would be perfect if they'd marry each other, though! Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!"



The Kids on the Ship

Bobby: Okay, you guys. You'd better be ready for this!
Tall: For what?
Bobby: For stowing away!
Humpty: We're already doing that...
Bobby: I mean, be ready for if they find us!
Troy: I'm ready. Since this plan was yours, Bobby, I was ready for failure the second you came up with it. I'm also ready with my testimony that you threatened me into it and I only participated under duress.

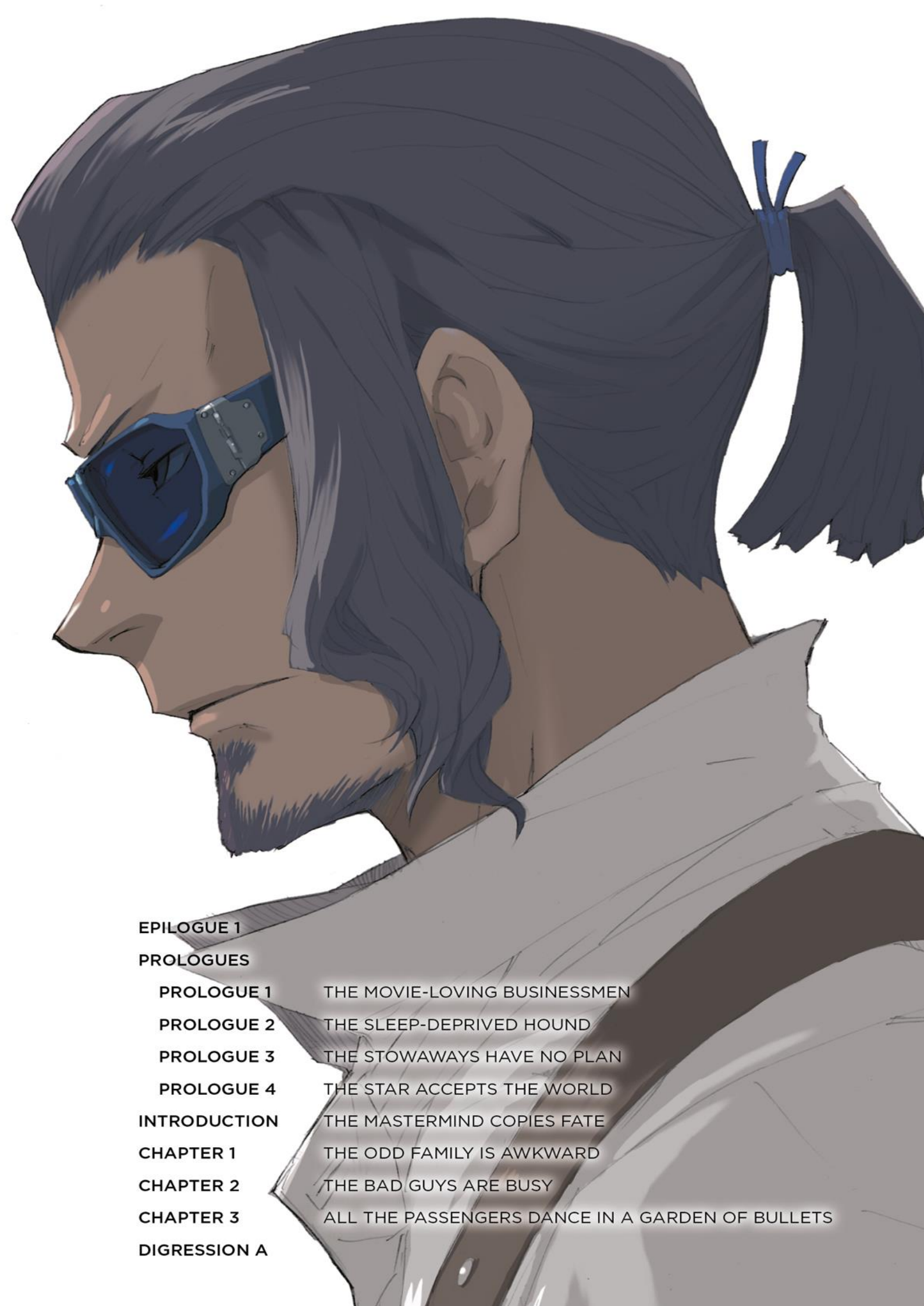
Bobby: Shut up!
Carnea: I-I'm ready now.
Bobby:Okay! First, let's put together our initial strategy! For starters, we'll walk around the ship and keep from being spotted. We'll hunt for that Firo guy, too!

Tall: How are we going to avoid being spotted?
Bobby: We'll figure something out!
Humpty: So, uh, you mean you didn't think up anything at all?
Bobby: It's called being flexible!
Carnea: Um... What if we found a big group and followed them around so people think we're with them?

Bobby: ...C'mon, Troy! Gimme an idea!
Troy: I'd say you should probably stop ignoring the girl behind you already. I don't know if you're embarrassed or what, but it's not going to do either of you any good.

Bobby: Erk...
Carnea: U-um, I... If it's a problem for me to be here, I'll go, so...
Bobby: H-hold it! It's not safe to go around on your own!
Troy: We're probably more likely to be spotted if we move as a group. Just being with you is dangerous enough, Bobby. For her and us.

Bobby: J-just shut up already!
Tall: I don't feel so great about this...
Humpty: I'm worried.
Troy: My trepidation is indeed extreme.
Carnea: Um... It'll be okay! Let's give it our best!
Bobby: ...Thanks. D-don't go holding us back!
Carnea: I won't!
Troy: ...Even if Bobby manages to get married at some point in the future, he'll be henpecked his whole life. I'd swear to it.



EPILOGUE 1

PROLOGUES

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PROLOGUE 2 THE SLEEP-DEPRIVED HOUND

PROLOGUE 3 THE STOWAWAYS HAVE NO PLAN

PROLOGUE 4 THE STAR ACCEPTS THE WORLD

INTRODUCTION THE MASTERMIND COPIES FATE

CHAPTER 1 THE ODD FAMILY IS AWKWARD

CHAPTER 2 THE BAD GUYS ARE BUSY

CHAPTER 3 ALL THE PASSENGERS DANCE IN A GARDEN OF BULLETS

DIGRESSION A

BACCANO!

2002 [Side A]: Bullet Garden

VOLUME 12

RYOHGO NARITA
ILLUSTRATION BY **KATSUMI ENAMI**



NEW YORK

Copyright

BACCANO!, Volume 12: 2002 [SIDE A]: BULLET GARDEN

RYOHGO NARITA

Translation by Taylor Engel

Cover art by Katsumi Enami

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Epilogue I

Now, then...

All right. If we're going to talk about what's brought us to this point, it's necessary to mentally shift gears.

Now, then is a very casual phrase, slipped into conversation as easily as the sugar you put in your morning coffee, but it's a truly important one. It marks an end to everything that came before it: conversation, action, thought, focus... In fact, you could even say it cuts them loose completely. My point is, it's a very meaningful phrase.

Now, then...

Let's move on to the main topic: this recent chain of events.

Those who weren't involved may end up treating it as single incident, rather than a sequence. Although I don't know what's going to happen from here on out.

It was a marvelous cruise, wasn't it? A luxury cruise ship is its own type of closed world, drifting on the ocean. It is at once a hotel; a fortress; and, should things go awry, a coffin.

And if it sinks, its passengers will be spared the trouble of conducting a burial at sea. It's a world that encompasses the whole of life and death.

Now, then.

Let's review the current situation.

Ah, I'm disappointed. I've used the phrase *Now, then* three times already, and yet you haven't been shifting gears with me. I'd really rather the person listening to my tale underwent some sort of change, too.

The despair on your face is the same, as are your attempts to crawl away from me and the whimpers from your throat...

And your fate. That, too, remains unchanged.

Now, then.

It's about time we continued the interrogation.

That said... You don't need to tell me anything. After all, there's nothing in particular I want to ask.

If I must spell it out for you, then let me hear you scream, if you would.

Please don't hold back—if it proves irritating, I can simply crush your throat.

PROLOGUES

- 1 THE MOVIE-LOVING
BUSINESSMEN**
- 2 THE SLEEP-DEPRIVED
HOUND**
- 3 THE STOWAWAYS
HAVE NO PLAN**
- 4 THE STAR ACCEPTS
THE WORLD**



Prologue 1—The Movie-Loving Businessmen

August 2002 Somewhere in South America

Clink-clink-clatter clink clink click-clink

“So okay. You know the movie Speed, right?”

“I saw One.”

“Me too.”

“Me too.”

“So did I.”

“C’mon, what about Two? You gotta watch Two. For us, Two’s the one that matters right now.”

“Is that the one with Willem Dafoe as the villain?”

“Yup! Good ole Willem. I’m impressed; you mentioned him before Sandra Bullock, and she was the main protagonist. You really know your stuff. Mm-hmm.”

Clink clink-clink

The table was abuzz with lively conversation, punctuated by the noise of knives and forks on china plates.

Here in South America, August was the dead of winter. Even though it was early afternoon, the cold air outside leached away the heat of the food in the restaurant. The ceiling was equipped with a climate control system, but it wouldn’t be much help. After all, every one of the surrounding windows was wide open, and there was no longer any difference between inside and out.

The windows weren't the only way the outside air was getting in, either; there were also countless holes in the walls. In fact, upon closer inspection, the windows weren't actually open at all. The sashes were shut tightly, but the glass that should have been in the frames had been shattered, and the fragments littered the ground outside the restaurant and the floor inside.

If you let your gaze travel a bit farther...

The restaurant's interior was splattered with red.

A dozen or so men and women sat around the table in the center, conversing idly as they ate. They were of all different races and heights, but for the most part, their ages seemed to be somewhere between twenty and forty.

Unlike the lively group at the table, however, the heaps strewn all over the floor didn't betray the slightest hint of life. They lay right where they'd fallen; if you imagined the whole restaurant as an enormous table, the piles of corpses would look like food that had been squirted with ketchup, then stabbed all over with a fork.

The group went on eating as if everything was normal, continuing their conversation so smoothly that you might even forget the heaps of corpses were there.

"God, Willem Dafoe is such a badass. I mean, he did the whole thing by himself. By himself! He pulled off a seajack working solo!"

"Hey, that was the character, you know. Geiger."

"Good job remembering the name. As far as I'm concerned, every role he plays is Willem."

"...So the detective in *The Boondock Saints* and the Green Goblin in *Spider-Man* are all Willem to you?"

"Yeah. And if you're gonna ask, how could you leave out *Platoon*?"

"Haven't seen that one."

“Seriously?”

“I saw it.”

“I haven’t seen it yet.”

“Is it good?”

“Oh man, you’ve gotta see that one!”

“You say that about every movie.”

“Wait, wait, I’m not done talking about this Willem thing. Is the vampire in *Shadow of the Vampire* him, too? You should call him by his character for that one, at least. After all, Max Schreck was a real-life actor.”

“Like I care?”

“Wha...? *Nosferatu* deserves better! You should apologize!”

“Apologize to Nicolas Cage, too!”

“What for?!”

The conversation was so chaotic, it was impossible to tell who was talking to whom anymore. Words were just flying across the table.

“Anyway, Willem is incredible; he hijacked a luxury cruise ship all by himself. Only Willem Dafoe could pull that off. Seriously, the guy’s a genius.”

“But at the end there, he, uh... You know how he ends up, right?”

“Come on, it’s Willem. Even with an ending like that, he’ll pull through one way or another! With leeches!”

“Leeches, huh? They’re pretty amazing, aren’t they? Heal diseases and all.”

“Leeches have nothing to do with any of this!”

“You’re the one who brought it up.”

"Anyway! What I'm saying is it takes way more than your average Joe to take over a cruise ship alone! That deserves serious respect."

"...Yeah, you're right."

"True."

"You've got a point."

Around him, the man's companions all nodded at his unusually passionate statement, smiling wryly.

After all...

...given what they were about to do...

"I mean, *we're trying the exact same thing with a big ole group of thirty.*"

Cackling, one of the diners knocked back a glass of juice.

"You think we couldn't do it with just the thirteen of us here?"

"No, no way."

"If we were Dennis Hopper or Christopher Walken, I think we could pull it off, but..."

The others followed suit, drinking from their glasses with a laugh. In the course of their conversation, they'd cleaned their plates, and now they were washing down the last remnants in their throats.

Then, exhaling in satisfaction, they picked up the idle conversation again as though nothing had happened.

"I kinda like this atmosphere."

"It's a whole lot like the opening of *Reservoir Dogs*, huh?"

"Nice."

"Guess that makes me Steve Buscemi."

"No, *I'm* Buscemi."

"I want to be Buscemi, too, you know."

"Moron. You think a woman could be Steve Buscemi?"

"Buscemi played Mr. Pink, remember? Pink could be a woman."

"The heck? Like the whatever Rangers from Japan?"

"Yes. Obviously."

"Wait, really?!"

The mood hadn't changed a bit...but something had dramatically shifted in the restaurant around them.

Whether they'd noticed that or not, the conversation continued in the same desultory way.

Then suddenly, one of the men at the table turned to the man who was now standing behind him.

"And? What about you?" he asked, as if he was just making small talk.

The newcomer was simply standing there between the carnage and the odd group who'd just finished their meal—arms folded, as expressionless as a Buddha statue.

"Yeah. I like *Reservoir Dogs*, too." The brown-skinned man's voice was brusque, but he'd spoken in fluent English.

"I see. So we're on the same page, then."

"I don't think it's a good comparison, though."

The man was big, close to six and a half feet tall, and he had the swarthy skin and mustache that were common among the locals.

And around him was a large group of other men who also seemed to be residents of the area. And maybe they were, but they clearly weren't on the right side of the law. As if to underscore that

impression, each of them held a weapon: guns or knives or machetes.

There were probably around forty of them. They formed a wall between the table and the piles of corpses, creating a human cage around the group who had just finished dining.

Then, arms still crossed, the tall man cracked his neck. "Just to be clear... Are you the ones responsible for these corpses over here?" he asked quietly.

The man he'd spoken to seemed amused, toying with his empty glass. "And if I said we were?"

"Why did you do it?"

"Business."

"...Did some syndicate hire you?"

"More or less. These guys picked a fight with us at this restaurant, and they just happened to be our targets. We really only needed to take out their boss, but, well, we were on a roll."

"..."

His casual answer was met with bitter silence. A chill was stealing into the air, but one man sitting at the corner of the table either didn't notice or didn't care. "So in this country, ordering fish always means cod, huh?" he said. "See, a while ago, when we went to Japan, they brought out so many different kinds of fish it was like, 'What is this, an aquarium?'"

"Got a problem?"

"No, no. I hate fish anyway. Real meat's where it's at, for sure. I love that about your country. Lots of meat in your cuisine. The portions are big, too."

“That’s great to hear. I’m glad you approve. Is there anything else I can do for you?”

“Well, it would be fantastic if you people would put down those guns,” the man said with a shrug, and his companions at the table snickered a little.

In contrast, the air around the men hemming them in grew colder and colder.

Every once in a while outside the restaurant, people who walked past from a distance glanced in, but as soon as they realized the nature of the groups inside, they automatically steered clear.

The police hadn’t arrived yet, and there was no sign they ever would.

That alone was enough to make it clear what sort of organization these newcomers belonged to. However, the group at the table were still perfectly unperturbed.

Still wary of them, the apparent leader of the second group spoke through slightly clenched teeth. “...For now, why don’t you come on a little picnic with us.”

Sensing the now-icy chill around the second group, the man at the table smiled quietly. “And what happens if I say we’d rather not?”

“We’ve got you perfectly surrounded, after all. About half of us will probably die from the cross fire.”

“You mean you’d all shoot at once with your friends across from you? Damn.”

“We have to. Otherwise, I don’t think we’d be able to kill you.”

He hadn’t let his guard down the slightest bit. If this really did turn into a gunfight, he’d probably pull the trigger even if it meant killing his comrades.

“...Damn, just because you’re willing to die doesn’t mean you have to.” The man at the table wiped his mouth with a napkin, rolling his eyes. “If you’re that scared, you shoulda just sniped us from a distance or blown up the building.”

“Our sniper and demolition guy are both taking their siestas.”

“Oh, well, in that case, it all makes sense. What, do they turn into Satan himself if you interrupt nap time?” he muttered, raising his hands in apparent surrender. “So you the boss of this outfit?”

The big man didn’t respond, and the fellow at the table sighed.

“Guess not, huh? Well, any boss who’d waltz into danger like this probably woulda gotten himself bumped off ages back.”

He giggled, and the big man slowly ran his eyes around the table, his face as expressionless as ever.

“Are you done? In that case, hurry up and choose: Are you coming with us or dying here?”

“Oh, that’s right. One last thing. You made one mistake.”

“What?” The big man’s eyebrows came down in a suspicious scowl.

Resting his elbows on the table, the man impassively corrected this mistake. “Back when you questioned if we were the ones who killed those guys, I just asked what would happen if I said yes, remember?”

“...?”

“Thing is, it wasn’t actually us.” The man gave a meaningful chuckle, then looked around at the group as if he pitied them, just a little.

“...Illness, Death, *sow yourselves over these men.*”

Just then—

—two shapes swung down on ropes from the southeast and northwest sides of the room, catching the surrounding group of men between them.

“Wha...?”

Even before the men could tense their muscles—

Even before they could register that the things that were hanging there, upside down, were people—

—the two figures from the ceiling each leveled a pair of black guns—

—and subjected their stunned targets to a rain of boiling hot lead.

“Oh maaan. That was overkill. What was the point of wiping them all out?”

Silence had descended in the restaurant, and the first one to break it was the man at the corner of the table.

“Yeesh. Swinging down from the ceiling and blasting away with both hands like gangbusters. Oh, that reminds me; have you guys seen the *Tomb Raider* movie?”

“I have.”

“Yeah, it was good.”

“I swear, you people only watch the blockbusters.”

“Even back when I was playing the games, I just knew Angelina Jolie was the only choice as Lara Croft.”

As the idle conversation started up again, the two people hanging from the ceiling flipped right side up, then dropped soundlessly to the floor.

At some point, holes large enough for an adult to pass through had been cut into the ceiling. Apparently the two of them had been lurking up there, waiting for an opportunity.

Both of them were, in a way, dressed for the occasion.

They looked like a special police unit straight out of the movies in their full-body suits—military fatigues that were easy to move in, dyed pitch-black instead of camouflage—and masks and mechanized

goggles covered their faces. It was broad daylight, so the goggles probably weren't for night vision, but since the two weren't taking them off, they must have had some sort of function.

Maybe these two were assassins, completely covered in jet-black except for their mouths.

Maybe they were brutal special forces who came to erase those who had learned national secrets.

Maybe they were heartless, unrivaled killing machines who showed no mercy even to women or children.

Or maybe they worked for the other side as military heroes who protected the civilians by eliminating all enemies from the shadows.

From the way they looked, most ordinary people would have imagined one of these scenarios. Of course, whether it impressed or frightened them was another matter.

One of the two had a toned, masculine body. The other's slumped posture didn't suit the outfit—but her relatively slender contours made it clear she was a girl.

Then, with the guns in both her hands lowered, the woman cocked her head. "Um, excuse me?" she said. Her sweet voice was the last thing you'd expect from her appearance. "Would it be all right if I said something?"

"What, Illness? Just go ahead and talk."

"Okay, so, the thing is, the smells of blood and smokeless powder are grossing me out, so I think I'm gonna be sick, and— Okay, can I just throw up now?"

No sooner had she spoken than the woman who'd been called Illness—who sounded young enough that *girl* might have been the better word—hurled all over the floor.

"Yaaaaaaaaaaaaagh! She threw up, dammit!"

“You id— Look, we just finished eating over here...”

“You looked so cool annihilating the enemy and now this!”

“Why aren’t your combat skills and mental stats balanced?!”

“What is this, a video game?!”

“You really are a child of your era, aren’t you!”

Illness’s apparent companions were letting her have it, and she flailed her hands (which were still holding the guns) up and down in frustration, puffing her cheeks out sulkily.

“Well, I can’t help it! It’s weirder to *not* feel anything after you just killed someone!”

“Whoa! Hold it! Don’t wave those guns at us! The weird one here is you! There’s definitely something wrong with you!”

As her companions hastily took cover under the table, the girl who only looked like a member of the special forces angrily threw out her chest.

“Hmph! You people sat in the middle of a bunch of corpses and ate a big lunch! That’s the weird— Blargh!”

“She blew chunks again!”

“Why’d you eat so much before a maneuver?!”

As the people around her shouted at her, the girl finally calmed down. Then she murmured to the men in front of her in a cutesy voice.

“So, hey, this restaurant? Up there in the ceiling, there were tons of cockroaches and rats and bugs I’ve never seen before. Like, literally tons. Kinda makes you wonder about the hygiene around here, huh?”

Bwuff.

Several people spat out the water they'd been drinking.

"That's just mean! Was that payback, Illness?!"

"Serves you right. You people should throw up, too; see how you like it."

"What are you, a kid?!"

"Yeah, now I remember why you got the code name Illness."

"Go back to the hospital!"

Ignoring his howling companions, the other assassin was wordlessly keeping a watchful eye on the area. The man exuded an overwhelming aura, cold as ice. If he wasn't in view, you'd never even know he was there, but once you saw him, the fear would freeze you in your tracks.

Noting that he wasn't distracted by the clamor at the table, the people who'd been eating spoke up, sounding impressed.

"Man... That's Death for you. He looks like a real pro."

"He *is* a pro. I know it's cliché to say, but he's the toughest guy in the organization."

"Illness, Death, Life, Aging... Even among our four great *weapons*, you really are exceptional. The Final Four. In Japan, they might call you the *shitennou*, the four heavenly kings of Buddhist legend, but... Even among them, you really are in a different league."

"Compared to you, it's like... Illness is the first one to go down, and then you and Aging come in and say, 'She was the weakest one of us' or 'Don't get full of yourself because you defeated a little girl like her.'"

As her companions offered their unsolicited two cents, Illness looked down, disgruntled.

Ignoring her, the man sitting at the corner of the table cracked his neck audibly. “Anyway, now we just need to put down the boss of this group and we’re done...but we killed ’em all. Should we make tracks before the cops show up, or do we want to try asking them where the boss is?”

It was a surprising suggestion.

Their attitude was truly laid-back, but they were seriously starting to consider fighting the police.

Completely unperturbed by that possibility, the man called Death radiated an aura into his surroundings that did credit to his name.

Until, just a few seconds later—

—the bullet that entered through his mouth shattered the back of his skull.

Prologue 2—The Sleep-Deprived Hound

“Huh?”

At the abrupt gunshot, the men at the table stiffened—

—and beside them, their companion collapsed with a thud.

Their strongest weapon—or so they’d once thoroughly believed—had been transformed into a meat doll that only twitched spasmodically every now and then.

“De...death?”

They couldn’t comprehend what could have caused what they were seeing or what it meant, and for a little while, they were stunned.

They couldn’t even turn their guns on the lone man walking into the restaurant.

“Wh-what the hell are you?”

At first glance, the brown-skinned man seemed to be empty-handed.

He was dressed in a relatively casual way; however, on closer inspection, he was holding a large pistol in each hand.

If that was all you’d seen of him, you might have mistaken him for someone in the same league as the corpses lying around the restaurant.

He was probably about thirty. He didn’t have a mustache; instead, his chin was covered with stubble.

He was a gunslinger.

He wasn’t wearing a ten-gallon hat, and he didn’t have a guitar case with guns inside. Even so, the man carried himself like a true gunslinger. It was enough to trick someone into believing for a moment that the devastated restaurant interior was a film studio.

Guns dangling loosely in his hands, he coolly answered the question about his identity.

"I'm the sniper," he said, stepping into the jaws of death as if such a thing meant nothing to him.

Naturally, the men at the table weren't unarmed, either. They all had handguns in their jackets, and a few of them were already reaching for theirs.

"The sniper...?"

"I was taking a siesta until just now. I got a late start."

"....."

The group at the table recalled what the big man had said before he was shot and killed a moment ago.

"Our sniper and demolition guy are both taking their siestas."

"I see. So that wasn't a joke, huh?" said the man at the corner, and a thread of tension quietly laced its way through the group. "You supposed to be a bodyguard? Not much of a guard dog if you're showing up now. Your masters are pretty much all gone."

It wasn't clear whether the other man was concentrating or not; he opened his sleepy eyes wide, and his extremely dignified voice echoed in the restaurant.

"I am no guard dog."

The gunman, who seemed like a joke, answered in stiff English, his expression dark.

"I am a hound." Just then, two gunshots echoed through the restaurant. "Even if my masters are all dead, I will tear out the throat of my prey."

The gunman's hands were still dangling at his sides—or they seemed to be.

But in fact, bullets had been fired, and brand-new smoke was rising from the downward-pointing muzzles.

At the table, two bodies thudded to the floor. A glance at the hands of the fallen corpses revealed that they'd had their guns out already. They'd drawn, and so they'd been shot.

That was all.

It was a simple rule.

Once the businessmen realized that, they moved fast.

They promptly kicked over the table in the gunman's direction and then dived behind it with the force of an avalanche.

All except for Illness, who just stood there awkwardly with her guns.

That empty-headed brat! What's she doing?!

"Um..."

Naturally, the girl couldn't hear her companions' internal screams. She thought for a while, *hmming* to herself, but then—her eyes went wide with realization beneath her mechanical goggles, and she threw her shapely chest out to declare:

"Heh-heh-heh. Death was the weakest one of us! Don't go getting a big head!"

"....."

Behind the table, the men and women all went silent. Simultaneously, they decided to go ahead and write her off as they adjusted their grips on their weapons. *Did our teasing bother her that much?*

As they did, the gunman nodded pensively, then spoke to the girl.
“...Young lady, the man I killed a minute ago, the one who was dressed like you—wasn’t he a companion of yours?”

“Yes. Why?”

“You aren’t grieving for him.” The man’s face was expressionless.

Illness *hmm*ed again and fell to thinking. Surveying the corpses that lay around her, she smiled sadly. “Hmm. Well, I mean, in this line of work, we could get killed at any time, too, so it’s sort of, like, I think of us as already dead? Or like, it’s not sad to me anymore, or um... Oh, what should I say? What should I saaaaaaay?”

Illness turned her guns on him. Her lips were smiling, but the rest of her face was completely hidden; the gunman had no idea whether her eyes held laughter or tears.

“I understand what you wanted to say. I’m sorry. That was an insensitive question.”

His reply was the signal for a volley of gunfire.

A second before, the gunman swayed, then took cover behind the salad bar near the entrance.

He’d moved as smoothly as a heat mirage, but his speed was nothing normal. With a swarm of bullets hot on his heels, the gunman vanished into the shadows—

And in the next moment, right after the bullets bit into the counter, he stuck his head back out from behind cover and fired two clean shots.

There were two solid thuds. Then groans.

However, neither came from Illness. The voices belonged to two of her companions, who’d poked their heads out and leveled their guns from behind the table.

All they were holding was handguns.

Since he'd killed Death first, Illness had been sure she'd be his next target, but he'd betrayed her expectations twice now, and she let her guns point at the floor again.

The group behind the table seemed to understand that if they drew, they'd be shot. They held their breath and took a few seconds to size up the situation.

In the midst of that brief silence, Illness spoke to the gunman, who was under cover again. "Hey, um, why didn't you shoot me just now?"

"Don't you know?" The sober voice coming from behind the counter sounded like stiff, worn-out cloth. "I don't kill women or children."

The answer was both simple and, in this situation, bizarre and impossible to understand, but Illness accepted it and called to her companions behind the table.

"Hey, now what do I do?! This guy's actually kinda cool!"

"Like we care, you moron!"

Naturally, the response was frustrated and unkind. It could have been worse, perhaps; they could have just ignored her entirely.

"He's selling you short, so let him have it, all right? Please!"

"That bastard gunman! He's a blatant sexist!"

"He discriminates against children!"

The gunslinger was ignoring the yells, but—

"Dammit! Quit talking like the hero in *Contract to Kill*!"

—he couldn't let that one go, and he called back from behind the counter, "You mean like John Wayne."

At that interjection from the enemy, the movie-loving businessmen mentally stepped out of the shootout for about three seconds and spoke among themselves.

“Did John say something like that in one of his movies?”

“I haven’t seen ’em all, so...”

“Maybe we should do a loop around the rental shops next time.”

The gunman called out again, interrupting their discussion about the Hollywood legend. “I don’t know whether Wayne ever said anything like that. But even if he never said it on the silver screen—we could pretend that he did. Can’t we?”

At that answer, the businessmen all grinned.

“Y’know, I think we’d probably get along, Gunslinger.”

“Yeah. That makes it even more of a shame that we’re enemies.”

“You ain’t John Wayne, though. You’re obviously Antonio Banderas.”

As they answered, the businessmen signaled each other with their eyes. Then they all took hand grenade-shaped objects from inside their jackets and tossed them across the floor.

“Hmm...?”

They were special smoke bombs.

The white smoke expanded explosively, obscuring the view in a matter of seconds despite the open windows.

As the flat white darkness covered him, the gunslinger thought. In this situation, the girl in the goggles was probably the one with the greatest advantage.

“I’d love to say this was interesting, but—”

The gunman sighed, his expression icy, and focused his ears on the faint noise of an engine.

"I'm sorry. I believe our demolition specialist is up from his siesta," he murmured.

A second later, he flung himself through a nearby window.

And once he was outside, the gunman saw what he'd expected to see.

A huge unmanned truck punched through the wall of the restaurant where he'd been a few seconds ago, mindlessly wreaking havoc on its interior.

Without looking back, the gunslinger started running.

After he'd gone about a hundred yards at an all-out sprint, he hid behind a nearby building, still stoic as ever.

...He knew what was coming. A second later, a massive explosion roared through the streets, swallowing the truck and the restaurant whole.



"...So they got away."

The gunslinger hadn't counted the corpses, but there was a certain conviction in his quiet words.

"Heya, Mr. Angelo. How's it going?"

The two-way radio at his waist sounded with cackling laughter, and the gunslinger—Angelo—picked it up and responded, blank faced.

"There's no problem. I accomplished the initial objective."

"You mean the one about chasing 'em out of the restaurant? Ah, wait, the boss wants to talk to ya. Hee-hee!" The demolition specialist laughed again in an ugly way.

After him—Angelo's boss spoke on the other end of the radio.



A few days later North America, somewhere on the West Coast

Unlike the restaurant that had been blown to kingdom come the other day, this bar had a sophisticated atmosphere.

Angelo didn't have his guns with him, but he still had that gunslinger aura around him, which made him extremely distinctive among the families and couples.

However, the modern-day gunman didn't care. He was gazing out at the view from his seat by the window, his face expressionless.

His eyes were fixed on an enormous fortress. Its pure-white walls towered high over the ocean, looking down on the surrounding buildings, simply existing.

It was one of the most luxurious cruise ships in the world.

The ship was used not just for overseas voyages but for trips around the globe. It was more than a marine hotel; it was a bona fide castle.

"....."

As someone who was preparing to *attack* that castle, the gunman quietly focused his mind.

Then his cell phone sent a vibration through his chest, breaking his concentration.

"Heya, how's it going, Mr. Angelo?"

When he took the phone out of his coat and put it to his ear, he heard a familiar coarse voice.

The demolition guy.

Unlike him, this man worked freelance, and the gunslinger heaved a quiet sigh upon hearing his voice.

Angelo had almost never seen his face, and the man only helped them out once or twice a year during big conflicts, but for some reason, he called Angelo frequently. Well, only once every couple of months, but still.

When the mystery organization had attacked the other day, the demolition guy had just happened to be around. “Hey, me and this group go way back,” he’d said, and then he’d tapped a few sources of intel for them.

As a result—

—they’d learned that the strange armed group was planning to travel to Japan by ship, to let things simmer down.

If they reached Japan, finding them again would be problematic.

“Look, I know I’m a freelancer, so maybe this ain’t my place, but the cartel’s done for, don’tcha think? Once you get hurt that bad, you can’t push the cops around anymore. If you make your triumphant return with their head, and there’s a parking lot where your syndicate used to be, well, that ain’t a very funny punch line, right?”

“Even if that happens, it changes nothing. What I have to do...is hunt them. That’s all.”

“What a hound! Really brings a tear to my eye. Well, I got paid up front, too, so I’ll do what I can do.” The man on the other end seemed to be thoroughly enjoying the situation. *“Hee-hee! I’ll be on board, too, so just relax. Let’s turn every last one of ’em into fish food.”*

“...Don’t do anything that will cause trouble for the regular folks.”

“Man, that’s cold. You’re talking like I’d blow up the whole boat.”

“Our objective is to identify their leader and their client; that’s all. There’s no need to start a war on a ship full of people,” Angelo said with a warning in his voice, then asked a very natural question. “In any case, if we’re going to be on board together, why not at least show your face?”

“Cause you stick out like a sore thumb, and I ain’t about to die young. Don’t you worry. On the ship, I’ll get weapons to you somehow. Once everything’s over, just throw ’em into the ocean along with the corpses, and voilà: no more evidence. The ocean sure is wonderful, ain’t she! Like a great big whore who swallows everything!”

“Don’t pollute the ocean,” Angelo retorted, and it was difficult to tell whether he was being serious or not. Quietly, he hung up.

He didn’t know how the man was going to get weapons onto a ship that was heading overseas, but the demolition guy always managed to handle things like that somehow. He was probably trustworthy.

Angelo’s eyes went to the ship again, and he thought about his targets.

According to the demolition guy’s intel, they weren’t an enemy organization per se. The group had been hired with money by some individual or syndicate.

They were a huge organization with a trail of unlikely rumors behind them. For example, that not only did they take simple jobs like murder; they would even foment civil wars.

A lone gunslinger could hardly afford to make an enemy of such a group.

After all, even if we are on a boat, there’s no guarantee that they’ll be unarmed.

With the unlikely possibility of his own death on his mind—actually, the probability was closer to fifty-fifty—Angelo thought of the family he’d left in his distant hometown.

“Carlos will be three this year, I guess.” He had yet to meet his son; he’d only heard the news of his birth.

Angelo resumed thinking about the enemy. A secret society of criminals might be a tasteless way to put it, but they really were a group of businessmen who engaged mainly in crime.

Their trademark was their masks.

During big jobs, this peculiar group invariably carried pure-white masks around with them for luck.

As a result, their organization was called the Mask Makers. As he thought about the group, the gunslinger murmured too low for anyone else to hear.

“...Once this job is over, maybe I’ll head back to Spain.”

“I’ll bring my wife and kid their masks, and then we can go to Venice or something.”

Prologue 3—The Stowaways Have No Plan

He chased us.

No, that's wrong; he didn't come after us.

Before we knew it, *he was just there*.

Until he showed up, we were invincible. We could ditch the fuzz with no trouble at all, and people said the little family that ran this area was so tiny a good wind would blow 'em away.

Dad and Mom, Grandpa and Grandma, and even my great-grandma with the eye patch told us not to mess with the Martillos, but what did they know about me and my guys?

I figured the adults were all preaching at me, telling me to keep my nose clean. Even if one of the Martillos did show up, I'd just pin it on them and let the cops get 'em.

But—

—I never saw this coming. I never even imagined it.

When we lifted the bag from that dumb-looking Japanese guy and then found that fancy camera inside, we were flying high.

But—

—we'd snatched stuff lots of times before this. Every time, it went off without a hitch. So we weren't scared of nothin'.

But—

—in our minds, we were invincible. After all, no one had ever even shown up.

But—

But—

But, but, but, but, but, but, but!

But he showed—he showed up.

He—they—showed up in front of us... Just showed up...

And now I'm running.

I don't get this at all.

We found out what or who he was right away. He said his name was Ronny or something, but that had nothing to do with anything.

We'd locked our hideout from the inside, and suddenly he was in there with us.

I don't mean he was hiding inside the whole time or anything.

He really just appeared out of nowhere!

We were just having a good time, hashing out where we should sell the camera and what we should do with the money, but—

—the next thing we knew, he was standing in the middle of our room and talking to us.

"I suppose I should say it's a pleasure to meet you...although I've known about you for some time."

"Wh-what the hell—what are you?!" I yelled, and he narrowed his sharp, demony-looking eyes.

"Hmm...? My name is Ronny. Well, not that it matters. What matters is the fact that you stole a certain item from a tourist in our territory, one second in importance only to his life. And the fact that, unfortunately for you, that tourist asked for our assistance."

*No, he doesn't just look like a demon. He is a demon; he's gotta be.
I can just tell; this guy's bad news.*

No, not just bad news, he's scary. Scarier than anything I've ever seen.

And so...and so, I snatched up my knife and squared off against him.

"Hmm. If a child is going to engage in mischief, he should be more childish about his choice. This isn't even a crisis; you weren't driven to this by starvation... Well, never mind."

And the next moment, the knife was in his hand.

Before I knew it, I'd practically closed my hand on air; the weight of the knife had disappeared, and now he had it.

We ran.

"Everybody scatter!" I yelled to all the guys in the room, then booked out of there with the camera bag.

I jumped out the window onto the balcony, then down from the second floor into the bushes.

My legs hurt, but I sucked it up and kept running. If he caught me, I was toast. I had the feeling I was already toast, but I couldn't afford to give that much thought.

Maybe I should have.

One of my buddies had said, "We should have just apologized and given him the camera," and I think he was probably right. Actually, I know he was. I was forced to see it, too.

When I turned a corner in the alley, the guy was somehow there—

And when I whirled around to run for it, he was over there, too—

He was everywhere, everywhere—

He was just plain *there*.

Then he grabbed my arm and—



“Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaugh! ...Mmrph... Gah!”

The boy had bolted up, screaming, and several hands darted in to cover his mouth.

“Bobby, you idiot! What’re you shouting for all of a sudden?!” a tall boy hissed at him, cringing.

“I thought you’d been real quiet for a while now. You were asleep?” asked a fat boy.

A small black kid whispered in a calm voice, “I suspect you were having a nightmare about the camera fiasco the other day. After all, if I remember right, you spent the whole next day trapped in an oil drum somewhere. It’s no wonder that particular trauma reared its head in another enclosed space like this.”

“Ghk...ghk-ghk...” Breaking out in a full-body cold sweat, the kid they’d called Bobby remembered where he was. “Y-yeah...,” he whispered back quietly. “Sorry, guys. N-nobody heard that, right?”

“Yeah, fortunately, there’s nobody around here right now. It feels like the ship’s going to be setting sail real soon.”

In the darkness, four boys were lying down, huddled close together inside a lifeboat on a certain luxury cruise ship.

It was a rigid boat with a roof, stored inside the ship. The boys had built a false floor inside it and were now hiding beneath it.

Strict checks were performed on board the ship to guard against stowaways. When the boys had heard the lifeboats were being switched out, they’d sneaked into the docks, and after an epic adventure—

—they’d now spent more than twenty-four hours inside the cramped space that they’d engineered.

“Man... They’d better really be on this boat!”

“They are. The DD newspaper’s information network is solid. Although I had to pay them with one of my cutting-edge computers.”

“You can afford it; you’ve got seven of ’em! Don’t be such a scrooge!”

“Agh... B-but what’s the point of finding them? This is somebody else, right? Not that Ronny guy?”

Their objective was a purely personal desire for revenge.

“I’m gonna stick it to the Martillos.”

One of the boys under Bobby’s leadership really should have stopped him as soon as he declared his intent, even if it meant putting his life on the line.

The other three were regretting their silence now, but at this point, there was no turning back.

They had a reputation as a group of young, local hoodlums, and half a month ago, they’d finally drawn the attention of the gang in charge of the turf where they “worked.”

The Martillo Family.

He had a feeling they were something called the Camorra, not the mafia, but right now, stuff like that didn’t matter.

In order to erase the terror and humiliation he’d been subjected to, Bobby was hell-bent on retaliating against them, no matter what it took. “I ain’t scared” was all he had to say at the possibility of dying, like a kid walking into a haunted house, and so he’d chosen to make an enemy out of a criminal syndicate.

Since they'd stolen from tourists again and again, the vast organization of the police was already their enemy. He'd bluffed that there was nothing to be afraid of at this point, but—

"At least if you get caught by the cops, I don't think they kill you...," the fat kid murmured.

"Don't be such a wuss!" Bobby retorted angrily in a quiet voice. "It'll be fine; once we take their money, we'll just stay on the ship the rest of the way to Japan and disappear! I hear that country's super-soft on crime, so we'll make a clean getaway for sure!"

As their leader filled them in on this extremely naïve plan, the fat boy and the small kid both raised some objections.

"I heard their arrest rate for dangerous criminals is over half..."

"They say it was over ninety percent at one point. In any case, I believe I'm the only one here who knows Japanese; with prospects like that, do you really think sneaking into the country illegally is going to go well? It's not as simple as stowing away."

Even the tall kid chimed in with them to lodge a complaint, whispering, "And I mean...you think we'll even get that far? Yeah, the Martillo executive who's supposed to be boarding today does look kinda weak, but... He's still an executive, right?"

A Martillo Family executive was going to be traveling on this ship.

Bobby and his gang had already put together a plan for stowing away, half just for fun, and to them, the report had seemed like fate. Of course, just because they assumed so didn't mean it was.

He was a wussy-looking, baby-faced executive who wore glasses.

They'd heard the rumors, but when they actually saw him from a distance, the guy didn't even seem to be five years older than they were— And right then, to Bobby's group, victory over the Martillo Family started to seem plausible.

That sharp-eyed man was one thing, but even they could probably hold their own against a wimpy executive like this. And so that childish impulsiveness and equally childlike energy—

—had brought them here, to this tiny, insufferable hiding place.

“If he was by himself, I wouldn’t have come up with this plan!” As he spoke, Bobby’s voice grew calmer. “He’s got his family with him. A puny lady and some little kid, maybe ten.”

“They’re his family?”

“Yeah, probably. I bet the lady’s his big sis, and the kid’s his brother. He’s going to Japan with his siblings.”

“Huh...”

As they were talking, a *thud* echoed in their ears.

It was the sound of someone landing on the false floor they’d made.

The color drained out of the boys’ faces.

The black kid just sighed wearily. His expression seemed to say, *Game over, hmm?*

Even so, they all kept their mouths shut, and as they strained their ears, listening to the sounds from up above—

They heard a voice.

Just one voice.

“A hiding place... I have to hide...somewhere...”

It was a girl’s voice, and she sounded young.

Huh?

While they were wondering what was going on...

“H-huh? The floor here looks loose...,” she said, and after a crunching, ripping sound, light poured down over the boys.

Startled, they looked up at the exposed opening in the floor, and—

A Caucasian girl with blond hair stood there, frozen and startled.

She was about the same age as Bobby and the others, maybe a little younger. She glanced around with concern—

Then, as if she'd spotted something, she hurriedly burrowed into the space with Bobby's group.

"Wha-wha-wha-wha-wha-wha...?!"



“I’m sorry! Please let me hide here, too!”

A cute girl had abruptly slipped inside, closed the open floor, then wedged herself in beside him.

Red-faced and totally at the mercy of an emotion he had no idea how to describe, Bobby snapped at the girl.

“Wh-what the hell?! Who are you?!”

In response, the girl smiled and gave him her name.

“I’m Carnea.”

“As you can see...I’m a stowaway!”

Prologue 4—The Star Accepts the World

The girl was fleeing desperately.

She could almost hear her legs screaming underneath her as she sprinted through the dusky town, her knees quaking from time to time, running, running, running—

It was as if her mind had completely disconnected from her body: While her legs traveled forward with all their might, her eyes were constantly shooting wary glances behind her.

To be accurate, she wasn't being wary.

She was just afraid.

She wasn't running with a specific destination in mind.

She was simply fleeing, driven by a primitive terror, based in both instinct and reason.

The girl pushed her legs past their limits, just to put even a few more feet between herself and the *something* that was closing in on her.

At first glance, there didn't seem to be anything in the spot she was looking at.

However, her body began to give out before her spirit did.

She had no time to think about running or even to scream.

The only thing in her heart was terror of the *thing* bearing down on her from the depths of the twilight.

"Agh!"

The girl tripped over something, falling hard onto the road.

"Ngh... Aah..."

As if she didn't even have a second to brush off the mud, she got up as quickly as she'd fallen, then started running again without bothering to check on the places that hurt.

But then it occurred to her to look at what had tripped her. It was a mistake.

What she saw was...

The lower body of what had once been a soldier, after his upper half had been mercilessly chewed off.

".....!"

The girl's face twisted, but she didn't scream.

After all, she'd grown used to the sight over the past few hours.

When surveyed from overhead, the area around her was littered with red splotches.

She knew what they were.

They were all "leftovers."

The girl broke into a run, attempting to flee from the inevitable, but—

It was already too late.

It was over before it had even started.

Running along the ground on just a thin pair of legs, she could never have hoped to escape from something free to swim through the air.

And then she saw it.

An enormous great white shark, blood dripping from its teeth as it powered through the air, bearing down on her from high in the sky.

"Eep..."

The girl could do nothing but stare up at it with unfocused eyes. It was as if she couldn't process the fact that the shape belonged to a fish.

A shark was flying.

It was a ridiculous reality, but seeing it, she knew that nothing but death awaited her.

The shark closed in on her, its huge maw gaping.

The enormous creature was violence incarnate; it could probably have swallowed the girl in one gulp without bothering to chew her to bits. It rapidly dived closer and closer, and then—

—as if it had noticed something, the huge fish performed an agile about-face, heading back up into the air.

He was standing there, between the girl and the sky, on the roof of a three-story building.

Wordlessly, he dived off the edge.

As he plunged downward, in free fall, the shark charged toward him through the air like a torpedo or a missile.

Just as the small shape and the shark's jaws were about to meet—the figure extended an arm, catching the arm of a streetlight, and spun around it to change trajectory.

Skreekl Skreekl Skreekl

Skreekl Skreekl Skreekl

Skreekl skreekl skreek-eek-eek-eek-eek-eek-eek-scree-scree-scree-scree-skreekl-skreekl

Creating a loud noise that echoed through the streets, the shadow skimmed right by the shark and landed in front of the girl.

"Huh...?"

The girl gazed at the one in front of her, wondering if it was actually human.

Iron was the first word that came to mind. Rugged gears had been cobbled together, layer upon layer, to spontaneously generate a new life-form—or so it would have appeared to the average bystander.

The gear monster was shaped like a rather small human. A featureless mask that had been polished to a mirror shine covered its face, and all over the rest of its body, gears moved stiffly in the spaces between its iron joints and muscles.

Without saying a word, the gear monster turned toward the girl, then flashed her a thumbs-up.

As it did, the gears on its arm and wrist all spun at once. “*Don’t worry,*” the powerful sound seemed to be saying, and the red-haired girl sank weakly to the ground with a forceful nod in reply.

...And that was how she first met the Gear, a clockwork human from another dimension.



“Okaaaaaaaaay! That was great... Really great!”

A man’s shrill voice echoed through the dusky town—well, through the film set that had been built to look like one.

In the same moment, the girl’s stunned expression instantly flipped to a confident smile, and she scanned the area around her.

A crowd of men and women greeted her with applause, smiling at her warmly.

Still beaming, she twirled in place.

Over her head, an elaborate animatronic shark hung suspended from a special crane, wagging its tail fin as if it were the real thing.

“Excellent,” the large black man continued, taking off his glasses and pinching the bridge of his nose. He spread his arms melodramatically and walked toward the girl and the gear monster. “Oh, I’m looking for just the right word... Excellent! I’ll shout it from the rooftops without a hint of shame!”

As he spoke, the man loudly broadcasted his feelings to the surrounding area.

“Shouting is the only way to express it! No, no, *excellent* isn’t nearly enough. Yes! Marvelous... Maaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaave lous! No, peeeeeeeeeeeeeerrrrrfect! Yes, it was perfect, and that’s no exaggeration!”

The several dozen surrounding men and women joined him in shouting with delight, all together. The shout became a cheer for the girl and the gear monster.

“Great work!”

“So it really is a wrap after this, huh?”

“I mean, the director just up and said he wanted to reshoot the opening again, all by itself.”

“Well, it’s perfect now.”

“I tell ya what, though, there was a whole month between then and now, but Claudia jumped right back into character. It was brilliant.”

“Of course she did; it’s Claudia.”

“I hear she was super-careful to maintain her weight until the editing was all finished.”

“I’d love to tell the director about that.” “Man, she’s so cute when she smiles.”

“Marry me, please!” “We’ve got ourselves a hebephiliac over here!”
“Somebody go call the cops!”

As the crew joked back and forth, the rotund black man—the one they’d called the director—thumped the immobile gear monster on the shoulder.

“Charon! That was wonderful! You truly are the Gear incarnate! We’ve already finished editing the other scenes, and your stunts were perfect! There aren’t many who can pull off those moves at your age! We never show your face, but your moves are an asset all on their own! What do you say? How about following in your big sister’s footsteps and becoming an actor...?”

“.....”

“Ah! Sorry, yes, I’d promised not to bring that up, hadn’t I?! Mea culpa, mea culpa. In any case, what I mean to say is that you did your job perfectly—it was better than perfect! And that’s God’s honest truth, or I ain’t your director John Drox!”

“...Thanks.”

Despite the director’s energy, the answer from behind the shining, mirrorlike mask was a single syllable.

The director nodded with satisfaction. Then he spun to face the girl and praise her acting, his enthusiasm building even further.

“I’m gonna say it, Claudia! People talk about the definition of art, but you, my dear, are a masterpiece just by existing on this world—in this universe!”

The girl grinned and replied, “Thank you, Director!”

Her smile was still youthful, but it was firm and assured. The next day, an entertainment newspaper would describe it thus: “She seemed to be smiling for the sunset, to show off her unshakable confidence and all the blessings the world had given her.”

In other words, that was who she was.

She was a child actor famous all across America, who, despite her popularity, wasn't picky about the jobs she took.

Claudia's smile gave them all the hope to carry on this life—the director and even the other members of the crew around them—just as it always had.



Thirty minutes later

“Great work! Another long day today, huh?!”

After returning to one of the most luxurious of the studio dressing rooms, the girl spoke to someone who was already inside. The gear monster, whom the director had called Charon a few moments earlier, looked exactly the way he had during filming.

“Hey, Charon? Just how long are you planning on wearing that suit?”

“.....”

“It really does look cool, though, so maybe there's no need to change!”

The girl giggled, and the gear monster began to remove his mask.

“Huh? Aw, you're taking it off anyway? Too bad. Say, if we gave back a little of your pay, you think they'd let you keep it?”

“.....”

A boy with black hair emerged from the suit. Red was faintly visible at the roots, suggesting he'd dyed it that way.

However, both he and the girl had very similar golden eyes; they were most likely related by blood.

The pair were probably somewhere in their early to mid-teens—still children, really. This dressing room they'd been tossed into seemed too large for people their age.

“.....”

Stripping off the gear suit, the boy looked around the room, his face expressionless.

But instead of him, Claudia spoke up again. “I did tell them we'd take a smaller room. Once the makeup artists and the other crew members are gone, this place really does feel empty.”

“.....”

The boy was as silent as ever, but the girl didn't seem to care. “I'm so impressed by modern technology. I can't believe how realistic that animatronic shark looks, swimming through the air! Seriously, I love him! How much you think it would cost to make one?”

“...Should've used CG,” the boy muttered softly.

The girl shook her head, as if to say *You don't get it*. “You don't get that warm texture from computer graphics; it's good this way. Besides, they're still using CG to erase the wires. Ahhh, I'd love to hang Sharkey from the ceiling in my room!” Claudia clasped her hands in front of her chest and twirled around.

Ignoring her, Charon picked up a pamphlet that was sitting on the table.

“.....”

Silently, he scanned its contents.

They devour the sky!

On a mission to find her missing father, Carrie and her daughter Aisha come to California, where they find a notebook he left behind—

but all that's inside are some peculiar, magical-looking patterns and a drawing of a single gun without a trigger. As mother and daughter work to unravel the mystery surrounding her father, a horde of "sharks that swim through the sky" suddenly attacks!

—But that's when a strange hero arrives—a being covered in gears from head to toe!

Film directed by John Drox

Based on the hugely popular Mode Gears comic series

The second movie, Shark Flight!

Spring 2003 Distributed by the McDannell Company

Scheduled for simultaneous global release

Pressing his fingers to his temples, Charon sighed.

Whether or not she knew what that sigh meant, Claudia thumped his shoulders lightly.

"Really, you did great, and I bet you're tired. Why don't you rest a little, too, Charon?"

"....."

"I wasn't in the previous one, you know. It was just you that time, in the costume. I knew somebody else did the voice since you're a dedicated suit-only actor, but...I never dreamed that you actually did *all* the inside stuff."

"....."

The girl was rambling on and on without pause, but the boy didn't respond.

This didn't seem to bother her; she just maintained the one-sided conversation.

“And like, I thought they used more special effects, you know? But when we started acting together, I saw that no, the inside work really was all you—they hardly even used any CG or wires! You’re more of a main character than I am, so you should take care of yourself.”

“.....”

The boy shook his head wordlessly, and the girl’s expression clouded over.

“Okay, Charon. I’m your big sister, so you should at least listen to what I’m telling you. I know you’re a stuntman, but still, if you get hurt, I’ll be, um... Well, it’ll suck!”

“...Sorry.”

The boy apologized to his sister, looking her straight in the eye. There was no timidity or fear in his gaze; he’d apologized after calmly determining that he’d been in the wrong, and it left his sister unable to put any more pressure on him.

“Don’t look at me like that and just apologize... Now I can’t get mad even if I wanted to.”

Claudia’s face had darkened further, but she recovered promptly, looked up—and ruffled her brother’s hair, mussing it.

“Listen, you’re sure you don’t want to be an actor, too?”

“.....”

He nodded silently, still no hesitation or compromise in his eyes.

As those golden eyes met hers, the girl laughed.

“Well, I guess that’s how you are, Charon,” she said, and her gaze shifted to the cover of a nearby movie magazine.

Printed on it was a large photo of her own face accompanied by the shout line “The Girl the World Accepted.” A staff member had probably thought of her and left it there.

But when the girl saw it, she seemed perplexed. “They got it wrong,” she murmured. “Well, I don’t mind the compliment, but...”

As she flipped through the magazine, she gave a self-assured smile.

“The world hasn’t accepted me. I’ve accepted the world!”

“.....”

“After all, *from the moment I was born, the world was mine!*”

His big sister was obviously talking nonsense, but the boy simply watched her with those straightforward eyes.

He knew she wasn’t bluffing or spoiled. As far as she was concerned, it was the truth.

The boy just gazed at her, without disdain or respect, and the girl went on confidently.

“After all, this world goes the way I want it to! You see? If I say I can do something, I can. If I can’t do it, then I work on it until I pull it off! If I do that, then everything’s possible!”

“.....”

“Come on, say something! I’m giving you an extra-special seat in my world, so say something cute for me!”

“.....”

His sister’s demand was patently unfair, but the boy didn’t look the least bit put out. He thought for a little while, and then—

—meeting her eyes, he gave the answer he’d come up with.

“...Meow.”

“Wha—?”

The girl flinched, startled. Whatever she was expecting, it wasn’t that. “...Uh, mm. That actually was kinda cute. You pass.”

She flushed, but her brother's face remained blank.

"I swear, robots these days have more expression... Don't just give me words; try looking cute, too."

It was another random demand, but Charon looked around the room. Then he picked up the magazine his sister had been holding a moment earlier. He rolled it up, held it to his eye like a telescope, and pointed it at his sister's face.

"....."

However, his actual expression was still blank.

"...D-does that...count?" Claudia didn't know how to react.

Then her brother held the rolled-up magazine to his lips, like a blowpipe.

"Argh! Now I *really* don't know how to respond to that. But it's kinda cute, like a puppy or something, so we'll call it good!"

The girl flashed him a firm thumbs-up, and the boy gave a faint smile of relief.

"...! Hey, no! Foul! Smiling now is way too cute; that's against the rules!"

At his totally unexpected smile, Claudia froze up completely. Then she snatched the rolled-up magazine from her little brother and tried to smack him over the head with it.

The boy dodged easily, his face a mask again.

Claudia's face was getting redder and redder with each missed swing, but—

—suddenly, out of the corner of her eye, she registered the presence of a roly-poly man with dark skin.

"Oh, Director."

Both siblings stopped moving, then turned to look at the intruder. And when they did, John Drox, the director of *Shark Flight*, fell to his knees and howled as if it were the end of the world.

“Nooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooo!”

“...?”

“What’s the matter, Director?”

“Auuuuuugh... The precocious little Hollywood star, playing like a child again with her brother!”

Interrupting the stunned boy and girl, the grown man pounded the floor vigorously, venting his chagrin.

“What a disaster... How could I?! Why?! Why didn’t I have a camera with me when I came here?! That little exchange just now was more chic than any footage I’ve ever filmed! It was completely real! Infuriatingly natural! A perfect opportunity, and I didn’t have a camera— Has the god of films abandoned me?! Oh God... God, my God! What have I done to deserve this?!”

At the director’s heartfelt yell, the siblings looked at each other...and just stood there, unsure whether they should be embarrassed by the man’s lamentations or not.

“Um, I, uh, I’m sorry you had to see that, Director.”

“...Sorry.”

Technically, they didn’t have anything to apologize for, but the siblings decided to help the director save face for now.

“Oh... No, I’m sorry. I’m calm now. Sheesh, you two; goofing around when the door’s wide open really isn’t fair, you know. If I coulda knocked at least, maybe I wouldn’t have had to see the adorable antics I was missing, and yet...!” Once the director had finally calmed down, he recalled the interaction and continued. “Maybe I’ll make

my next film a domestic comedy... A forbidden love between siblings. Before long, their relationship creates conflict between them and their parents..."

"That isn't a comedy, is it? It's more of a suspense film, don't you think? Also, there's absolutely no forbidden love whatsoever between us, so if you go saying that stuff to the paparazzi, I'll break my contract. Understand?"

"....."

Claudia was smiling brightly, while Charon nodded silently, his gaze cold.

Drox shook his head, bringing himself under control with a couple smacks to his face.

Smacking his own face—which had the sort of charm one would get from crossing a bear with a piglet—the director told them why he'd actually come.

"Oh yes, well, we'll talk about the next film another time! Never mind that—about the publicity for *Shark Flight*. We spoke before about going to Japan as part of the campaign this time around, didn't we?"

"Yes, you'd said to keep a month free, so I'm fine, but..."

Nodding in satisfaction, the director slapped his portly belly and, with an energetic smile, took out two project write-ups and handed one to each of them.

On the paper, written in a firm hand, was a very clear line of text:

Re: The Grand Shark Flight Publicity Plan (and We'll Shoot the DVD Bonus Footage While We're At It) On Board the Twin Luxury Cruise Ship Entrance

It was so descriptive that it hardly seemed like an official project write-up at all.

Introduction—The Mastermind Copies Fate

My name is Copycat.

Nothing but a mimic.

Just a humble criminal.

Come, let's repeat it, repeat it.

Let's do it all over again.

First, we'll get all the pawns together.

Then we'll throw them in a pot and put on the lid.

Let's stew them with water, not fire.

Burning and drowning, tumbling and drifting.

Once more, with feeling.

Let me see what I so wanted to see.

My name is Copycat.

I'm nothing but a mimic.

Just a humble criminal.

But what to copy? No, not the individuals.

No, not actions, either.

What I should mimic are malice and coincidence.

When I've copied coincidence, will I become a copy of God?

If so, then let's create a world.

Let's reproduce it, recreate it.

Let's reenact a world.

Let's reproduce that luxury train.

Let's reproduce that utterly isolated world.

If it goes well, I'll clap quietly.

It's for me, all for me.

LALALA LALALA LALALAALAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA
AA AA
AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAFDAIJDJA IOSIJAIOJFIAIHDSFAUGYAWGYUAJINJFD
JKLHF0QWAIJSDA9-WQAI@ASKDKAOJDJIOPGADOP3Q9-0-9KO@AD
AYGWYGAUHAJIOJIODSAIJIDJA SIJOSAJIOADSK@

Oh, what fun. I'm getting all psyched up.

Let's go let's go let's go let's go let's go let's go let's go let's
go let's go let's go let's go let's go

Just putting it in writing might be enough to take me to the heights—
How embarrassing. I'll erase it now.



One month before "the incident"

The figure at the keyboard smiled quietly.

Smiling, they hit the backspace key.

Hit it. Hit it again. Smashed it.

Holding the key down would erase everything, of course, but they
cheerfully tapped at it.

Takka-takka-takka-takka takka-takka-takka-takka

Rhythmically, in perfect time, they hit the backspace key over and over until the screen was pure white—and then they kept going, grinning in utter delight.

As if that delight was born from the deepest depths of their soul.

Tak-tak-tak-tak-tak takka takka click

CHAPTER 1

**THE ODD
FAMILY IS
AWKWARD**



CHAPTER 1

THE ODD FAMILY IS AWKWARD

“Holy crap—it’s huge...!”

That was the baby-faced young man’s first comment.

A second later, he snapped his mouth shut and darted a hasty glance at his surroundings. Clearing his throat, he pretended he hadn’t said anything and tried again, with a bit too much sophistication this time.

“ Ah...I mean, uh, it’s magnificent, isn’t it? Perfect for venturing out in the vast reaches of the ocean and sky, I’d say.”

The bespectacled young man gave a bright and pleasant smile, but—
—the illusion was broken when, behind him, he heard someone choking back laughter.

“Snrk! ...I—I can’t...! Ah-ha, ah-ha-ha!”

At the sound of the innocent, childlike giggles, the young man flinched.

“Wha...? What’s the matter, Czes?”

“Oh, c-come on...! You’re trying way too hard, Firo!” Biting back his laughter, the boy who’d been called Czes looked up at the young man. “Besides, F-Firo... That tux looks terrible on you!”

“Erk... R-really? Does it look that bad...? Well, it’s not like I can change it now, so give me a break, okay?”

Maybe he didn’t think it looked good on him, either. Firo Prochainezo, the young man in the tuxedo, took off his nonprescription glasses and put them in their case, scrutinizing his own clothes.

“Hey, Ennis, what do you th—?”

As he turned to his right, Firo stiffened.

Standing beside him was a familiar woman *with whom he’d spent over seventy years* by now.

Firo had become immortal as the result of a certain incident in 1930, and ever since, he’d been living with this woman. A year after that, Czes—Czeslaw Meyer, a boy who was also an immortal—had joined them. They’d joyfully welcomed him as a kind of little brother, and the three of them had spent these many long years together.

For a human, it would have been a lifetime. For an immortal, it might have been no more than an instant.

When about fifty years had passed, Firo had gotten up the courage to propose to that woman—and now here she was, still at his side.

Ennis.

Ennis Prochainezo.

From her features alone, Firo’s wife appeared to be about his age, but thanks to the calm aura she exuded, people often assumed she was somewhat older.

And as Firo’s eyes landed on his wife, time froze for him.

The dress she wore had a rather low neckline, and although its design was plain, that simplicity only emphasized the beauty of the woman wearing it. Her arms were exposed, and since she usually wore a suit, this garment made her seem completely different.

Of course, it wasn’t as if Firo had never seen Ennis’s arms or cleavage. She dressed lightly at night, as you’d expect, and he’d seen photos from times when she and Czes had gone to the beach or the pool.

However, the way she looked in the bright sunlight, wearing a brand-new dress for the first time, left far more of an impression than he'd anticipated.

Noticing that Firo's gaze was riveted on her, Ennis looked down, seeming embarrassed.

"Um... Does it look bad?" She sounded a little apologetic.

"Wha...?! N-no, Ennis, not at all!" Firo hastily waved his hands and shook his head.



The gesture made him look like a naïve kid with his first love; it was hard to believe they'd been together in some form for more than seventy years.

When Firo was wearing his glasses, he just barely managed to pass as a young adult, but now that he didn't have them on, and especially now that he was floundering in front of a girl, he could have been mistaken for a boy.

Once again, he tilted that youthful face back, craning his neck to see the towering, floating thing in front of him.

The best word to describe the structure before them would be *giant*.

Elegant, opulent, resplendent, magnificent—all those words were apt, but *giant* was the one that applied more than anything.

The luxury cruise ship *Entrance*.

It was a floating royal palace, as if someone had taken a brand-new resort hotel and set it on the ocean.

The ship had been built a few years earlier as a joint project between enormous Japanese and American corporations, and now it was one of the most distinguished cruise ships in the world.

It was said to offer luxuries from all over the world, and although it was a passenger liner that hosted various events, this unique ship was also equipped with huge cargo bays large enough to drive cars around in.

In the past, an international motor show had been held on board; it was even more famous as an event venue than a cruise ship.

However—there was one more unusual thing about the vessel.

Its sister ship, *Exit*.

A second ship of the exact same type had been built, and the pair had been christened *Entrance* and *Exit*, in the sense of “Entrance to paradise” and “Exit from the ordinary,” respectively.

The most vivid display of the uniqueness of these two ships was the “Crossing” that occurred when they sailed across the Pacific or Atlantic Oceans. The ships would pass within eyeshot of each other, and each vessel would launch fireworks toward the other, wishing it well on its voyage.

“Hmm. What’s so great about seeing the exact same boat?” Firo had muttered back when he was flipping through the pamphlet.

However, now that he was actually looking at this ship, the event made a whole lot more sense to him.

Full length: 1,004 feet.

Total height: 180 feet.

Total width: 171 feet.

Due to the size of the cargo bays and the event stage, its regular crew was slightly smaller than usual for a ship this large, but even so, it had the capacity to carry more than twenty-five hundred passengers and a thousand crew members. If you tipped an average skyscraper over onto its side, the ship would probably still be longer.

“They tend to call this thing a castle on the ocean, but...I don’t think many castles are this big,” Firo said appreciatively, sounding as young as he looked without his glasses.

Meanwhile, Ennis was also gazing up at the white wall. “I didn’t think they’d manage to create something like this in less than a century,” she murmured, a sentiment that was based on the long life she’d lived.

“I dunno about that. Personally, I think this country’s frontier days were more impressive. You shoulda seen how fast they were laying down those rails everywhere.”

Even when confronted with this enormous ship, Czes didn’t sound especially impressed behind them.

That was when Firo remembered that this boy, who seemed so much younger than they were, had actually lived more than two centuries longer.

“Maybe so, but we weren’t alive back then, all right?”

“Are you starting to feel like respecting your elders a little?” Czes teased with a smug little smirk, and Firo ruffled his hair with his left hand.

“Don’t get full of yourself, kiddo.”

“Waugh!”

Czes ducked away from Firo’s hand and hid behind Ennis, his hair a mess.

Ennis watched them both, smiling gently.

It was a heartwarming scene; even someone outside their little family would think so.

Yeah, this is going pretty well, Firo thought. They really did seem like a family, and he felt utterly blessed for it. Czes has been so much happier ever since he got back from his trip with Maiza, too... I dunno what happened, but it must’ve been something good.

Half a month earlier, Maiza and Czes had returned from a journey to visit other immortals, their old companions.

For several decades before that, Czes would put up walls between himself and the rest of the world, then deliberately act like a child in order to hide them.

But after he'd returned, those walls had mysteriously disappeared.

Before, he'd never done anything to remind Firo and the others that he was older than they were, but lately he'd started cracking jokes about it himself.

Firo had gotten curious and asked Maiza about it, but the only answer he'd gotten was "You'll have to thank Elmer for that."

Elmer—Szilard's knowledge held hardly any memories of the man. Szilard had barely looked at other people in the first place, so that was only natural. However, from the memories of the alchemists Szilard had eaten, he could gather that Elmer was a very odd duck.

Well, he had a long life ahead of him, and he'd probably run into him someday.

Firo would thank him when that day came, but for now, he decided to focus on making sure the new Czes felt accepted as their older little brother.

Both as the cool and levelheaded Camorra executive he usually was and as the man he was with his family—an awkward kid who hadn't changed in seventy years.

"Still...everybody around here seems loaded. Figures."

The passengers crowding around him were diverse, but every single one of them smelled like money.

The handbook had said, "You are requested to attend the launch ceremony in formal attire," so Firo had been planning to wear his usual suit, but—

"Firo, on a boat like that, 'formal attire' means tuxedos. Your regular suit counts as casual."

His boss, Molsa Martillo, had admonished him, and so he'd gone all out and had a tuxedo tailored.

Czes wasn't the only one who'd laughed at him. When he'd worn it to Alveare as an experiment, he'd ended up getting razzed by Randy and Pezzo, the other executives, the lower-ranking associates of the family, and even regular customers who had nothing to do with the Camorra.

"Man... Even Maiza laughed. Isaac and Miria said it looked really good on me, but I dunno what compliments from them actually mean."

At present, the scale of the Martillo Family's business had dwindled considerably.

It was true that the police had clamped down harder and were watching them more closely, but people also didn't go out and gamble as much as they used to.

Due to the organization's policy of not dealing drugs, their only stable sources of income were protection money and the spice import agency they'd started as a cover for their underground businesses.

That said, those circumstances had changed a few years ago.

Although their scale was smaller, they weren't hurting for money.

Molsa had gotten into futures trading out of his own pocket, and a few years ago, he'd struck it rich and used the money to open a chain of Alveare restaurants.

That business had begun to stabilize, and so the Martillos' dealings as Camorra had become more of a side business. Lately, some of the restaurant employees didn't even know the Martillos had a darker side.

I wonder if we're just gonna end up going straight.

His old self wouldn't have stood for that, and he probably would have fought it.

However, now that he'd acquired a family and lived such a long time with them, going out of his way to engage in underground business didn't seem necessary anymore.

Well, I did swear loyalty to the caposocietà and to the Martillo Family. No matter what happens, I'll stay true to my word.

He'd stick with them to the end. He didn't know where that end would be, but until then, at the very least, he'd take good care of what was within his reach.

Suddenly, Firo came to himself with a start and looked around.

Wait, what's with me? Why am I thinking about all that now?

As he took a few deep breaths, he realized where the tension had come from.

Is it really something to get this nervous about?

Stealing a glance at Ennis beside him, Firo squeezed his hands into loose fists.

...This "honeymoon" thing.



It all started with one of Isaac and Miria's usual conversations.

"Say, Isaac?"

"What is it, Miria?!"

Inside Alveare, the TV had been showing a feature on the marriage of Marie Antoinette when Miria had spoken up, eyes sparkling.

"How long is a honeymoon a honeymoon?"

"Well, it's the first trip you take after you get married."

“It is? Even if it’s been years and years?”

“Of course, Miria! After all, when two people are in love, they can find new things any old time!”

“That’s amazing!”

For Isaac and Miria, it was a perfectly ordinary conversation, but Firo had looked over at them.

What’s their deal? I know they were talking about it on TV, but I don’t think that’s all. Did they finally decide to start thinking about getting hitched?

The couple was indifferent to things like marriage or family; they seemed happy just being themselves. It was unusual to hear them talk about this subject, so Firo decided to listen in on their conversation for a while.

However—

—the next instant, he regretted he was even there.

“I see! Then Firo and Ennis still have time, huh?!”

“Of course they do!”

He spluttered and spit out his mouthful of liquor, then decided to assume that it was just an auditory hallucination brought on by drinking so early in the afternoon.

...But the rest of the restaurant wouldn’t let him.

“Huh? What the hell, Firo? Didn’t you guys take a honeymoon?”

“No wonder they don’t have a kid yet!”

Randy and Pezzo started cackling, and the other people in the restaurant who had too much time on their hands joined the conversation, one after another.

“Wait, actually, don’t tell me he hasn’t even...”

“Well, I doubt it’s possible.”

“The guy’s a serious late bloomer. It’s practically a challenge to male DNA.”

“Maybe not worrying about dying anymore sort of muted his instincts for procreation?”

“No, I think he’s probably just embarrassed... Well, never mind.”

“Are you kidding me? The guy’s about ninety—are you kidding me?”

“I actually feel bad for Ennis.”

“At least they kissed.”

“Yeah, we saw that, too.”

“Oh, yeah, that’s right. Come to think of it, some weirdos crashed the wedding ceremony, didn’t they? That made a such a big impression I forgot about the rest of the wedding.”

“Well, sure. The church was one big puddle of blood.”

“Man, that takes me back.”

With nothing better to do, the others in the restaurant gradually gathered around Firo, cackling and discussing his relationship.

“So what about it? Even if it wasn’t an official honeymoon, have you ever taken her on a trip anywhere?”

“N-no, sir... I had to stay here.”

“In that case, I’ll take over as *contaiuolo* for you again, so don’t let that worry you.”

“Not you too, Maiza!”

After that, Firo’s merry yet irritating friends started noisily grilling him.

Firo tried to duck the barrage somehow, but—

—Miria gave him an unusually serious look and struck the finishing blow.

“Well, Firo, it’s just that... Ennis wouldn’t say anything, but every time this stuff comes up on TV, she watches it really intently, you know?”

That came as a fairly heavy shock, and after he got home that night, he went to talk to Ennis and cleared his throat.

“Uh, hey, Ennis?”

“Yes?”

She noticed something about him was different from usual; her expression turned serious as well, and she waited for him to go on.

“.....”

Silence. It wasn’t easy to say “Let’s go on a honeymoon” while he was looking right at her.

“What is it, Firo?”

“W-well, uh...”

Ennis was technically his wife, but she treated him much the same as before they’d gotten married. There was less distance between them now, but she was still relatively proper around him. He doubted that would ever change, even if they eventually had a daughter or son. It was the most laid-back way Ennis knew to be, and he had no plans to complain about it.

Still, in this situation, her propriety made him tense.

On the night after their rather eventful wedding, she really had been happy to have received the name “Prochainezo.” Remembering the softness in her smile back then, Firo quietly found the words.

“...Let’s take a trip.”

“A trip?”

“U-unless you’d rather not.”

“No, if it’s with you, I’d love to go.”

“...!”

Ennis had said it so easily, it left Firo flustered.

It wasn’t clear whether she’d noticed that as she gazed steadily into his face. “But, Firo, did something happen? This is so sudden.”

“Huh?! ...No, well, uh...”

As he groped for something to say, there wasn’t a trace of the dignity of an underworld executive about him. He was just a boy who was embarrassed to come out and tell her he wanted to take her on a honeymoon.

Just then—

“I’m home.”

Czes had chosen an excellent time to come home, and Firo gave an answer fueled by desperation.

“It’s...it’s a family trip!”

“?”

Czes was staring at him in confusion, and Firo went on, talking fast.

“I mean! You know! You said Denkurou might be in Japan, right? Well, get this! Just a couple weeks ago, on the day you and Maiza came back, I made friends with a Japanese photographer! He told me to come over and visit sometime, but traveling alone is— Well, you know how it is!”

He wasn’t even thinking anymore as he rambled on; the words were just leaving his mouth—

—and at long last, he managed to say what he’d really wanted to say.

“So this is a perfect chance! Let’s go! All of us!”

The next day—

—when he heard about the situation from Randy and the others, Molsa had said, “Come to think of it, I never gave you a wedding present,” then he snagged and paid for three tickets on a cruise ship to Japan from some mysterious source.

At the time, Firo had thanked him profusely and accepted them, but later, when he saw the price of their cabin online, Firo’s eyes nearly started out of his head. Having spent thirty years as the syndicate’s treasurer, he was stunned.

That suite cost more than ten thousand dollars per person.

He very nearly went to go interrogate him (*Capo! Tell me where this money came from!*) but then thought better of it. He suspected the answer would be terrifying.

Plus, thirty grand shouldn’t be a big deal for a gang anyway. It’s kind of sad...

He was positive he’d be indebted to his boss for as long as he lived, but with that, their odd family—husband, wife, and older little brother—made plans to sail over the Pacific.



Two weeks passed.

As they finally prepared to board the vessel, Firo checked his passport and papers, reminding himself several times to calm down. Immortals were bound by a rule that kept them from writing down

false names, and so in order to avoid trouble, there was one place on their passports that needed to be falsified.

Specifically, their age.

When he'd gone to Italy on an earlier occasion for a different matter, they'd noticed his passport said he was over seventy, and he'd been detained for a day while they looked into it. Victor Talbot had bawled him out on the ensuing international phone call: *"Why didn't you talk it over with me before you went, jackass?! Exactly how many problems are you planning on causing me? Huh?! Just you try making some kind of trouble over there and sticking me with the bill; I don't care if it is a tourist attraction now, I'll bury you in the basement of goddamned Alcatraz again!"*

Although, technically, that had been partly Firo's fault. "Check with a guy named Victor at the FBI," he'd told them. "He's my guarantor."

To avoid a repeat of the incident, he'd had his age falsified under the table ahead of time.

As an immortal, he couldn't give a fake address or name, but apparently if he got someone else to falsify his age, it was possible to manipulate official documents. This was probably because age would be irrelevant in a search for other immortals.

Similarly, Czes and Ennis had had their ages falsified so they wouldn't draw attention.

Yeah, this is perfect.

With that thought, Firo went into his departure inspection in high spirits, but—

"By the way, is liquor sold on board in places other than the bar?"

Firo had cleared his throat and asked the question in as mature a tone as he could manage, but the girl at the desk just giggled.

"Even on the ship, minors aren't allowed to drink."

“...Take a look at the age on my passport, if you would.”

“Oh! You’re twenty-five? I’m sorry, I just assumed you were underage!”

Firo couldn’t even get mad at the receptionist and just trudged into the ship.



“I think twenty-five might have been a little ambitious, Firo,” Czes commented, giggling, while Ennis was deep in conversation with a staff member about having their luggage brought in.

“Lay off, all right? I thought I looked pretty mature in glasses.”

As he waited for Ennis, Firo sighed. Czes glared up at him, smiling in a knowing way.

“Still...you totally used me as an excuse, didn’t you?”

“What are you talking about?”

“You called this a family trip, but it’s actually supposed to be a honeymoon. Right?”

Czes’s voice was too quiet for Ennis to hear, but Firo froze up.

“Wha...?!”

“It’s fine, Firo.” Czes leaned in close to Firo’s ear and gave a slightly precocious smile as he murmured, a little meanly, “I’ll do my best not to disturb the two of you while we’re on the ship, and at night, I’ll hang out in the movie theater for you.”

“—! ____!”

Firo’s mouth gaped uselessly. He was about to argue, but just then, Ennis came back, and he had to fall silent again.

“Firo, what’s the matter? You don’t look well.”

“Bet he’s seasick already,” Czes said with a laugh.

Glancing at him, Firo was both impressed and reminded of something: This kid definitely had way more skill and experience in life than he did.

That said, right now, an actual child probably wouldn’t have had much trouble messing with Firo anyway.



The trio had declared they were going to Japan and passed through their departure inspections without any issues, and currently they were peering down onto the port from the edge of the ship.

They’d been shown to their room already, and the suite was bigger and classier than any hotel room Firo had ever stayed in. The fact had made him dizzy, and he’d simply left his luggage there and escaped out on the deck.

After spending thirty years in Maiza’s shoes, reckoning the flow of money into and out of his organization, he could tell at a glance just how valuable the place was.

Man, Ennis and Czes might be able to fit in here, but...I sure don’t. Ennis is pretty, so of course she fits in, but how come Czes is used to wearing tuxedos, too?

In an attempt to shake those complaints out of his head, Firo looked down over the ship’s railing and realized once again just how big this vessel was. This was the height of the roof of a modest building, and the people swarming around below seemed ant-sized.

The sight made him wonder if this thing would actually sail all the way across the ocean, and he took another good look at the whole ship.

Right now, he was on the forward deck—and that was only near the top of the ship's middle level.

What took up the most space in the upper reaches of the ship was the structure built in its center, higher than the bow.

He hadn't been up there yet, but it sounded as though they even had a river pool and tennis courts there.

I'll go over later and lo—...?!

What the heck is that?

As he gazed up toward the top of the ship from the bow, Firo's eyes went round.

An enormous crane beside the vessel was lowering a massive object onto the bow.

It was a gigantic shark, more than thirty feet long.

"Wha...? What's a shark doing here?!"

Firo wasn't the only one who'd cried out. The passengers around him were shouting, too, but not from fear. They were cheering.

"What is this...?"

Slowly, the giant shark was lowered onto a platform in the center of the deck, in front of Firo.

Several workers began busily centering the shark on its pedestal, and a few of the surrounding passengers started taking pictures.

"Ohhh, so that's what they were talking about."

"Incredible, isn't it...? I can't believe that's a robot."

“A-a robot? What was who talking about?” Firo asked Ennis and Czes, because they seemed to understand the situation more than he did.

“Huh? Didn’t you hear about it, Firo? After this ship reaches Japan, they’re gonna have a publicity event for a movie on board.”

“That’s what I heard as well. They’re using the ship to transport an animatronic shark, and they may also hold a variety of events during the voyage.”

“Is that right? I didn’t know any of that.” Processing this new information, Firo looked at the enormous shark again. “Boy, robots these days are really something, huh? If I didn’t know better, I’d say it was the real thing... By the way, what movie are they publicizing anyway? *Jaws 5*?”

“Um, I don’t really know, either. There was a section about it in the guidebook, though,” Czes replied.

The guidebook had been sent to them before departure, and Firo remembered that he had it with him. When he took it out of his jacket and opened it, he found a loose sheet of paper between the pages with the series name *Mode Gears* and the title *Shark Flight* written on it.

“Hmm?”

Firo had heard that title before, and he was about to read the paper more closely when—

“Uncle Firo!”

—a young girl’s voice called his name, and he turned around, wondering what was up.

Standing there was a redheaded girl with shining eyes, and a little ways behind her was a boy with a mechanical-looking expression.

“...Claudia! Charon, too!”

For a moment, Firo was startled—and then delight spread across his face.

“Ha-ha! Wow, it’s been forever! I haven’t seen you in—what, about a year? Ah, so this is for that movie, huh? The one where Charon’s the guy in the suit? Come to think of it, I did hear you were going to be in the sequel, Claudia. Well, you’re looking really good. That’s great.”

“Yes! I’m glad you’re looking well, too, Uncle Firo!”

The girl pirouetted on the spot, held her skirt out to the sides with both hands, and gave a little curtsy.

“What was that for?”

“I wanted to show off my dress!” It was an honest answer, and Firo just sighed and gave a little smile back at her.

“It’s been a long time, Claudia.”

“Ooh! You too, Ennis; I haven’t seen you in ages!”

Claudia was acquainted with Ennis as well, and her face lit up.

She called Ennis by her first name, but she minded her manners around Firo, the way children were expected to for older men.

Firo almost never got treated like a middle-aged man, and he absolutely loved it.

Still smiling, the girl turned to her uncle, who was now in a fantastic mood, and asked him a question.

“Anyway, I’m so surprised to see you! I never expected to run into you two on this ship... Are you taking a trip?”

“Us two? No, Czes is here... Huh?” Firo glanced around, but Czes had vanished.

When he looked into the distance, he spotted a small figure in a tuxedo near the door that led into the ship from the deck.

Claudia seemed to have spotted him, too; she puffed out her cheeks, pouting. "Geez! What's his deal? He's clearly avoiding me!"

"I dunno why, but Czes has been uncomfortable around redheads since way back," Firo replied. Suddenly, a thought crossed his mind, and he decided to do a little catching up with Claudia. "Oh yeah, how are your great-grandparents? Still doing well?"



“Yes! Great-Grandmother is well, and *Great-Grandfather Felix* is the same as ever. He said he was going to give Great-Grandmother a pirate’s treasured sword, so he’s in the Caribbean raising a sunken ship.”

As the great-granddaughter of one of his oldest friends recounted the story, Firo smiled wryly, remembering the guy’s face.

“...That jerk Claire. He’s doing really well for a guy who’s over ninety...”



As Firo chatted with Claudia, a short distance away from them on the deck, a small commotion broke out.

“Hey, check it out.”

“Huh?”

“That’s Claudia! Over there. Isn’t that Claudia Walken?!”

“...There you go with the jokes again.”

“This guy was saying some crap about seeing Travolta down in South America, too.”

The source of the noise was a group of men and women dressed in relatively casual clothes compared to the tuxedos and gowns around them. Their suits and jackets were expensive, though, if casual, so they didn’t stand out all that much on the ship.

It was the group of businessmen who’d caused a ruckus in South America just a few days previously.

Even though a few of their friends had recently died, their conversation was hardly any different from in the restaurant.

“Forget that—just look! See?! Her! The little one over there!”

“Where...? ...?!”

“Whoa, seriously?!” “You’re kidding!” “He’s gotta be kidding, right?”

As they spotted the girl, the group of movie buffs got more and more excited.

“What did I tell you?! It’s Claudia! What’s she doing here?!”

“It’s that! There, the shark! They said they were going to use it to publicize the new Gear film!”

“You’re kidding!! Claudia’s going to be in that B-movie series?!”

“What, didn’t you know? There, the one standing a little behind her. That’s her brother, Charon Walken, isn’t it?”

“For real?!”

“Yes, for real. Charon’s the suit actor inside the Gear, remember? Claudia’s his big sister, and I hear they pulled her in to star because of him. It’s a movie about a bunch of airborne sharks chasing people around, so I imagine that’s one of the sharks in question.”

“So Claudia’s the shark’s buddy?”

“Not really. They’re enemies.”

“Whoa... Geez, kid, choose your projects! But why this ship?”

“They’re probably going to do publicity work in Japan, yeah? You know, there’s that giant shark dummy...”

“Who goes to Japan by boat?!”

“Hey, somebody get a camera! Does anybody have a camera?!”

Although this group was being exceptionally noisy, Claudia had been surrounded by flashbulbs before she boarded the ship as well.

Even now that she was on board, a helicopter from some magazine publisher was flying around overhead.

Claudia Walken.

Even though the young actress was just fourteen, she'd appeared in many popular movies and made hits out of many others. She'd appeared in everything from profound human dramas to special effect-driven shows, B-movie horror films, and splatter flicks. The incredible versatility of her expressions made her a hot topic, and while contemporary Hollywood had high hopes for her future, she was already more well-known than a run-of-the-mill star.

Back when she'd made her debut, there had been rumors that her father, a famous comic-book creator, had forced the deal somehow, but she'd silenced all the critics through sheer skill.

By the time her annual earnings had surpassed her father's, she still had many detractors, but no one claimed she'd built her current position on her family's fame.

There was one other: a boy who'd become famous along with her.

Charon Walken.

He was Claudia's little brother, and although he never took center stage, he was becoming someone every movie buff knew.

He was one year younger than his sister, and when she had debuted, he had entered the movie industry as a stuntman for child actors.

Due to his unparalleled motor skills, he was also becoming famous not just as a stuntman but as a suit actor in action-hero programs. He played the Gear, the young clockwork hero of the previous year's *Mode Gears*, which had drawn particular praise for its practical effects-driven action sequences.

However, he categorically refused to become an actor, so while he "moved" roles, he absolutely never "acted" them. Even the Gear's voice was dubbed in by a different child actor.

His features were so well formed that as long as he didn't speak, he could be mistaken for a beautiful young girl, and his straight hair contrasted with his sister's curls.

Many producers had tried to make him into an actor, citing the constant demands of female fans, but he told them he "wasn't good at talking" and had successfully refused them.

However, he did appear in photo features in movie magazines without showing any reluctance, so apparently he wasn't averse to exposure itself.

The simultaneous presence of those two movie stars, the one in the spotlight and the one behind the scenes, naturally excited the businessmen. The surrounding passengers, who seemed like celebrities themselves, also cheered, but no one was gauche enough to run up and ask for a handshake.

In other words, their behavior made them stick out terribly, but they didn't seem to care and kept right on going completely gaga over the stars in front of them.

"Hey, seriously, doesn't anybody have a camera?! Or a marker even! I'll get them to sign my clothes..."

"How much of a drooling fan are you? —Oh, right." One member of the group suddenly seemed to remember something. "I'm pretty sure Illness has one of those new cell phones with a camera."

"Oho. Of all the people it could have been, it had to be you, Illne— Hey, where'd she go?"

"Huh? She was just here..."

The businessmen looked around, and then they all froze. Several of them might have even heard their spines going stiff.

The girl they were looking for—

—was sauntering right up to the movie star they were all talking about.



“Hellooo!”

“?”

A voice called to them abruptly, and when Firo turned around, he saw a girl in peculiar clothes. Age-wise, she appeared to be about halfway between Ennis and Claudia, but with none of the energy.

She wore a yellow-and-black Gothic-style dress, and she was holding an open parasol. The design on the parasol was creepy: a single enormous eye. But although that eye was wide open, the girl’s were languid and sleepy with large dark circles under them.

Except, on closer inspection, those dark circles had actually been painted on with thick eye shadow.

What is she, a baseball player?

Firo wondered if it was to keep the sunlight out of her eyes. This girl had just appeared out of nowhere, and he wasn’t sure what to think of her.

She struck him as more of a true-blue Gothic vampire than a Gothic Lolita, but the yellow cloth, which was especially bright in the sunlight, made it hard to make a final call. The design was less like mourning clothes and more like something vaguely blasphemous. The skirt was of a length that would be easy to move in, and below it, she wore boots that stretched almost to her knees, with safety pins attached to a section of the laces.

Her naturally golden hair was incredibly beautiful, and in combination with her slightly drooping eyes, she was quite cute—but

her unique manner of dress, the eye shadow taking over her pale skin, and the general sense of ill health around her made the girl an irregularity on the brisk, refreshing deck.

She looked like a vampire who'd been weakened by sun exposure, but her voice was unexpectedly spirited as she spoke to Firo's group.

"That shark is so cool, isn't it?"

"Huh? Oh, yeah," Firo replied. "It's really well made."

"It's incredibly, um...cute, don't you think?!"

The girl gave a strange little giggle, confusing Firo even more.

"...Uh, I dunno about that," he answered frankly. *Maybe she's a friend of Claudia's? Another actress from the movie?*

But—

"Thank you for saying my Sharkey is cute! ...By the way, I don't think we've met before, have we? Is she a friend of yours, Uncle Firo?"

"Huh?!"

Claudia's question told Firo that he'd guessed wrong.

That's not it? So she was just passing through...? Is she one of Claudia's fans? he thought. He momentarily considered protesting how quickly Claudia had associated this strange girl with him, but—

"Oh, she isn't? She's got such a great outfit, and it reminds me of some of your friends, Uncle Firo. I just assumed..."

"Ghk."

Christopher, Isaac, and Miria's faces rose in his mind, and he was left with no alternative but to shut up.

"Um, see... I'd been wondering about that shark this whole time, and everybody said it was your friend, so I, um...I wanted to know if I could pet it. Uh, also, I'm sorry. They all said you were somebody

really amazing, but I don't know anything about you, so, erm, I'm sorry."

You can keep that stuff to yourself, you know. Firo glanced at Claudia, wondering if the Gothic girl's awkward comment had annoyed her.

He couldn't have been more wrong. The young movie star wasn't upset that the other girl didn't know her; in fact, her eyes were sparkling like a little kid's.

Making a small, pensive noise, Claudia gazed at the older girl, then grinned and took her arm.

"Well, it doesn't matter whether you know about me or not! Your outfit is cute, and more importantly, you said Sharkey was cute, so... You must be a good person!"

"Whoa, whoa, whoa!"

Pulling the Gothic girl along with her, Claudia started over to the shark. "This way! I'll let you ride on his back!"

"Huh... I-is that okay? Um, hey, when I get on his back, can I hug his dorsal fin and everything?"

"Yeah! I'll even let you give him a kiss!"

"Huh?! Oh, but...! That's so bold! Um, erm, th-thank you!"

The peculiar girl flushed bright red now, and Claudia marched over to the shark with her in tow.

As he watched them go, Firo muttered in disbelief.

"Wha...? What was that all about?" *Kissing and hugging...the shark?*

There were plenty of other things he would have liked to comment on, but he kept them to himself. In the end, they could all be summed up in one remark.

Claudia's got so much personality and energy... She's really starting to remind me of Claire.

"And anyway, what's Sharkey?"

"The shark's name. Sis named it."

The answer had come from Charon; Firo and Ennis hadn't noticed, but he'd come over to stand beside them.

"Oh, is that right?"

"....."

The boy nodded, then stood there at attention, unmoving. Looking at him, Firo gave a rather chagrined sigh.

"You should talk a little more, would you? I know a lot of people in your family take after your great-grandma, but you're almost as hard-core about it as Chané was."

"...Mr. Keith talks less."

"He's a whole different issue. He is pretty chatty when he's on the phone, though."

"Mr. Keith...doesn't make phone calls. That's the phone fairy," the boy told him decisively.

Although Firo was concerned, he chose not to say anything else.

I guess this kid isn't quiet because he takes after Chané. He gets it from Keith.

He'd heard that when Charon was little, he'd frequently been sent to stay with Keith.

Keith Gandor was the boss of a small crime syndicate and a mutual childhood friend of Firo and Claire. Firo didn't know what Charon had found to idolize in the extremely taciturn man, but he'd grown into a quiet boy all the same.

Firo had no idea what Charon was thinking, but he considered him the last line of defense against Claudia's wild impulses, and so if he was calm, Firo couldn't ask for more.

"This may prove to be a lively voyage."

Beside him, Ennis was smiling, but Firo's feelings about it were complicated.

There was nothing wrong with *lively*, but at this rate, it might not be much different from their ordinary routine. This was a special chance, and he'd wanted to make some memories alone with Ennis. Then again, he suspected that might not be their style in the first place.

In the end, unable to come up with an answer, Firo smiled back at his wife.

"Yeah, looks that way."

Then, as if it had been waiting for those words—

—an announcement that the ship was leaving port echoed all through the vessel.



In a shipboard corridor

I swear... Claudia's here, of all people?

As he listened to the departure announcement, Czes was exploring the ship's interior on his own.

"I really can't deal with that family..."

Every time he saw that blazing red hair, it reminded him of the terror he'd experienced seventy years ago.

Claire Stanfield.

The man was a legendary hitman who went by the nickname “Vino.” He’d put Czes through pain and fear worse than death itself, inflicting lasting trauma on him.

Even after he’d inexplicably changed his name to Felix Walken, many of his children and grandchildren had inherited similar personalities.

Every time Czes was around one of them, he remembered that past terror, and Claudia was no exception. She’d been dropping by Alveare to play ever since she was younger than Czes looked, and whenever she was there, she’d dragged him around.

Her personality was moving closer to her great-granddad’s every year, and it felt like a threat to him, but—

I never dreamed I’d run into her all the way out here.

Walking down the ship’s corridors reminded him of another time.

That ugly incident on the Flying Pussyfoot.

I really don’t seem to have much luck with traveling.

As he walked along, lost in thought, he felt a *thud* and realized he’d walked into something.

When he looked up, a lone man was standing there. He was wearing a black jacket over a white shirt in midsummer, but he seemed cool enough; he wasn’t sweating at all. The white shirt stood out especially pale against the man’s dark pants and swarthy skin.

He probably had roots in Spain or somewhere similar, rather than South America.

His eyes seemed to hold a fiery passion, hemmed in by a wall of ice meant to keep it in check.

This is bad.

Czes knew at a glance:

Something set this man apart from citizens who walked on the right side of society. He'd come from a place where everyday life was different.

He wasn't like the immortals. He seemed more like Firo and the others, as if he'd come from some shadowy underworld.

He wore blue sunglasses over his sharp, narrow eyes, and the expressionless mask of his face was different from Charon's.

What do I do? Should I run?! he thought without even realizing, and his feet instinctively took a few steps backward.

The man seemed to have picked up on Czes's fear. A slight smile appeared on his lips.

"Sorry about that, kid. I'm not used to this ship yet. I guess I wasn't watching where I was going."

"U-um... I should be saying that to you, mister. I'm sorry!" Czes hastily apologized.

The man told him not to worry about it, then started toward the stairs.

As he watched the man head down to the lower levels, where the relatively cheap cabins were, Czes breathed a sigh of relief.

What on earth was that? I really hope it's my imagination, but...

On seeing that there was a man who was clearly not a respectable citizen on board, Czes's mind remembered a certain scene even more intensely.

If I recall correctly, I ran into Jacuzzi before everything went to hell back then, too.

The Flying Pussyfoot, a train on the transcontinental railway.

Immortals.

A homicidal maniac.

Terrorists.

A band of delinquents.

And—the Rail Tracer.

He remembered it like it was yesterday; a whole slew of strange people had boarded that train together and created an exceptional incident.

Czes's heart trembled quietly.

That's ridiculous. You're overthinking it.

Several coincidences had come together to create that mess, and those kinds of events wouldn't come along more than once every hundred—no, every three hundred years.

The prospect of a long voyage in an isolated environment probably had his nerves especially on edge, he decided. He had to forget about the man for now.

However, even before Czes forgot about the man—something else had slipped his mind, too. Something important.

Never mind once in a century—he was surrounded by people who got caught up in incidents like that one practically every year.

And he was destined to join in such a fate.

Whether by coincidence—or by design.

Interlude

"How's it going over there?"

"Lovely. I can't believe how comfy this ship is! What about yours, Misao?"

"Ha-ha. The same, of course; what else would it be? It's just like the one you're on, Hiroko."

"Still, our timing was terrible, wasn't it? We're going to sail right past each other. If you'd come while I was in America, I would have at least treated you to dinner."

"Well, that probably wouldn't have been a good idea."

"Why not?"

"I still have feelings for you."

"...You're reading too much into it. Over here, it's nothing for divorced couples to eat together."

"Well, never mind that. I hope I get to see you during that Crossing event."

"You really do still have feelings for me, don't you? I wonder if it's fate—like two ships passing in the night."

"Could be. Seriously... My photographer friend won the grand prize in a lottery two months in a row, but he told me he had guests coming over from America and sold the ticket to me instead. Talk about timing."

"Oh, is that the man who got attacked by the bear? I never would've guessed he had American friends... Wait, the last big prize was a trip to New York, wasn't it?"

"Yeah. I tell you, he doesn't have a lot of money, but when it comes to things like this, his luck is fantastic. When I heard he'd won a

department store lottery this time, I thought he must have made a deal with the devil or something."

"I can imagine... Still, I feel a little bad for him. This is quite a ship; he's missing out."

"Speaking of, are there any odd people over on the Entrance?"

"We've got some movie actors and a director. I hear they're going to hold some sort of event. You have any celebrities over there, too?"

"I dunno if he's famous, but there was a guy wearing a mask that seemed sort of tribal."

"What?"

"And he wasn't the only odd one... I saw a big man who looked like a professional wrestler, and a stage magician... There were a few who gave me weird vibes, too, but they might be comedians from overseas. Seriously, it's so hard to talk to anyone here. The ship is leaving from Japan, but the majority of the passengers are foreign."

"Is that why you called me? You're so funny—'Phone calls are fine, but dinner? No way.'"

"I feel better when I hear your voice, but seeing your face makes me cry."

"You're like a little kid."

"Ah, I'm sorry. I'll hang up soon. I didn't mean to interrupt your trip."

"It doesn't bother me. Never mind that—are you going to be able to cover the phone charges?"

"Oh, yeah, I'm using the ship's satellite link, so even a ten-minute call is going to be astronomical..."

"You'd better hang up, then. You've just started working, and you don't have much money either, do you?"

"...Can I call you again tomorrow night?"

“Sure.”

“Two nights from now... Before the Crossing. I’d like to call you then, too.”

“Let me call you that time. We’ll probably spend the whole event talking to each other anyway.”

“Thanks. Now I have something to look forward to on this trip.”

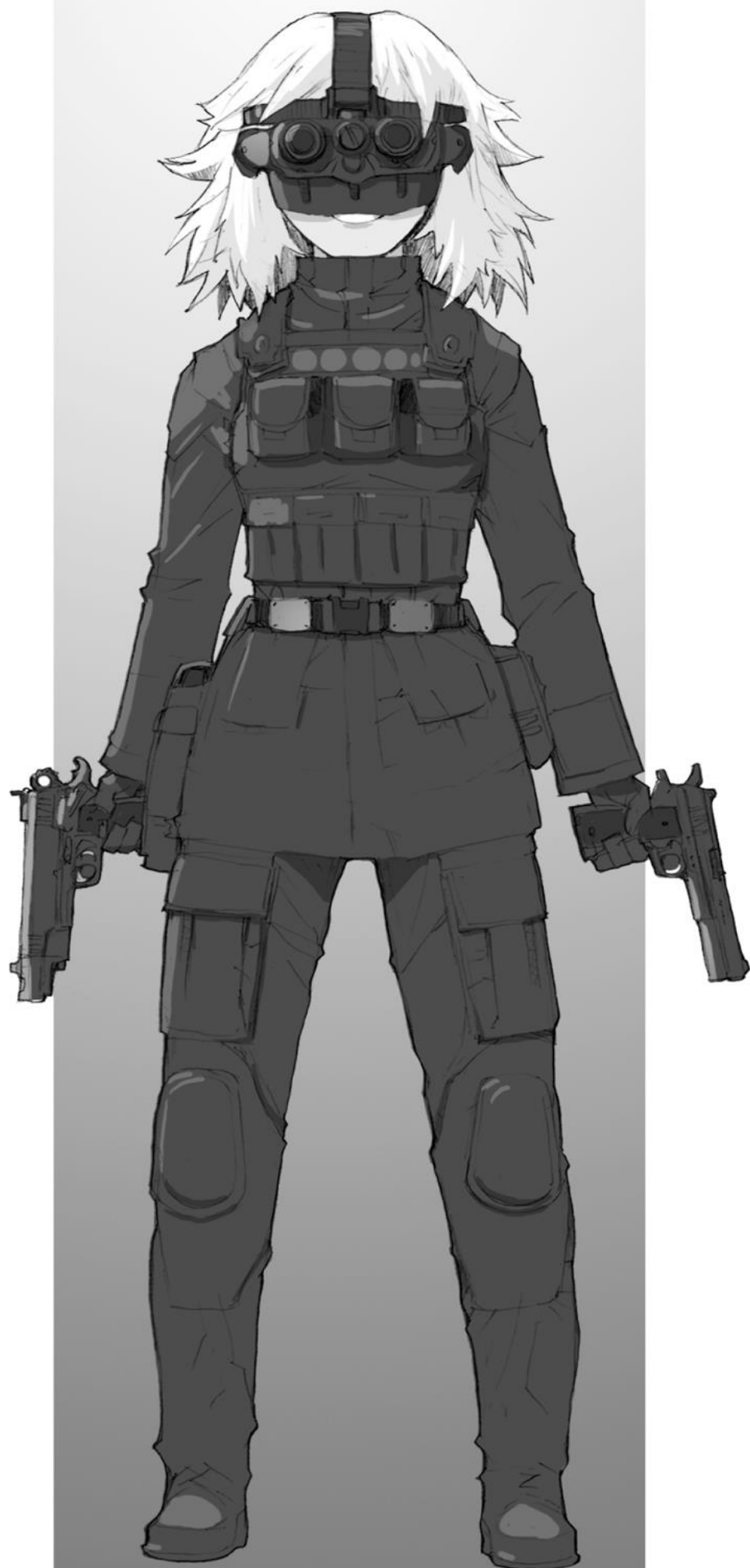
“All right, then, see you tomorrow night... Although there is a time difference to deal with, isn’t there? In that case, shall we say twenty-four hours from now?”

“Okay, twenty-four hours. And also forty-eight hours. Oh, one last thing.”

“What?”

“Have a wonderful trip.”

“...Bon voyage.”



CHAPTER 2

**THE BAD
GUYS
ARE BUSY**

CHAPTER 2

THE BAD GUYS ARE BUSY

Voyage Day One Night

A small ship traveled over the ocean.

Well, small only in comparison to the luxury cruise ship.

The vessel, which was on the large side for a recreational craft, was moving over the waves at a good clip.

There were no other ships in sight. Just ocean in all directions. Overhead, the starry sky was unusually pretty: a natural planetarium, picture-perfect.

Among these sights, it would have been easy to believe all land had sunk under the water, but the ship merely pressed forward, heading toward some unknown destination.

Finally—a shape came into view.

Far ahead, another light joined the star's reflections floating on the water.

As the vessel drew closer, there was enough light coming from it that it could be mistaken for a small island.

When the boat was near enough that those aboard it could identify the luxury cruise ship, the smaller vessel decreased its speed, dimmed its lights, and crept closer and closer.

Ordinarily, the cruise ship would be the faster of the two, but the small boat had anticipated this. It read the ship's course and circled around ahead of it, closing the distance slowly.

Then—

—just about the time it was necessary to start considering the possibility of a collision, a shadow launched itself from the boat.

The lone black shape, a human figure in a black wet suit with a small propulsion device in each hand, quietly made for the ship.

In the ocean, where darkness concealed everything, it seemed almost like a torpedo.

Seen from up close, the cruise ship was moving faster than anticipated. Even at its enormous size, it sometimes traveled at a speed greater than thirty miles per hour.

The diver wouldn't stand a chance in a collision with it, and if they let the ship pass by, they could get dragged into its wake and be turned into hamburgers without anyone ever knowing.

However, the figure fearlessly approached the vessel—

...And latched on to the ship's hull with practiced ease.

The things on their arms were probably giant suction cups or something similar.

It wasn't clear how they worked, but the diver unstuck and re-stuck the suction cups by turns, climbing up the side of the ship like an insect.

Before long, when they had climbed up the wall to the height of the roof of a modest building, they reached a balcony in the lowest tier of passenger cabins.

On the *Entrance*, these semi-suite cabins were concentrated at the front of the ship, and each had its own private balcony.

Once he had arrived, the man silently set to work.

He took a small winch out of the case he'd been carrying on his back, attaching it to a rope that stretched from his waist down to the surface of the ocean.

Then, just as he was about to begin slowly hauling up the cases floating on the end of that rope—

He heard the cabin's glass door open behind him, and the occupant stepped outside.

He spotted the man on the balcony and gulped.

The intruder wore a black full-body combat suit like the sort worn by the special forces; his whole face was covered by a silicone mask, and he was wearing night vision goggles.

As he spotted the clearly abnormal being who had appeared on his balcony—

—the cabin's occupant exhaled.

“Don't scare me like that, Life. At least knock or something.”

The man in the cabin was one of the businessmen.

“I believe I'm on time. In fact, I was surprised that you weren't waiting out here,” replied the man in black. Not even a sliver of skin was showing.

His voice sounded detached, like a machine's. It was fairly muffled and distorted, probably due to the mask, but you could tell, if only barely, that it belonged to a young man.

“If we all waited out here, the people in the surrounding cabins would get suspicious.”

“Our people have fifteen rooms around this one,” Life calmly pointed out, and the occupant of the cabin spat into the ocean from the balcony.

“Picky, picky. Death really was the best, before he kicked the bucket.”

“He certainly was the most skilled of all of us. Without him, we’re probably done for.”

“Don’t jinx us.”

“I mean, really. Losing our greatest weapon on a small job before the big one? Hopeless. I’m participating in this maneuver because the president told me to do so, but honestly, I think our prospects for success are slim at best.”

The businessman sighed in irritation at his companion’s frustratingly impassive attitude.

“Man, shut up. You Four Afflictions should just zip it and do what we tell you. You brought the stuff, right?”

“If you’d like to be certain, I’d appreciate it if you’d help me haul this up as soon as possible.”

“Tch...”

The businessman was obviously not happy about this, but he went along with it and helped pull up Life’s cargo.

A few minutes later, as they opened the two heavy cases that they’d hauled in:

“...This is perfect, Life.”

Grinning, the businessman acted as if he’d never been upset at all.

The cases were packed with the tools of their trade.

Lots of standardized guns and multiple hard objects that appeared to be hand grenades. In addition, there were several pieces of equipment, including some whose purpose wasn’t apparent at first glance, that could make you wonder whether they were planning to fight a war.

As a matter of fact—that was more or less what they were doing.

“What’s this? Damn, you even brought the RPG. Are you planning to sink the ship or something?” The man in the cabin smiled with some surprise, taking out a distinctive tube.

“If the situation calls for it, I imagine it would be possible.”

“Ha! Didn’t you know? Whenever the bad guy brings a weapon like this onto a ship or whatever, the hero’s gonna get his hands on it and shoot down the getaway helicopter with it at the end.”

“Then I hope you’ll conduct yourself prudently, so that nothing of the sort happens.”

“Tell it to Illness, not me.” With that parting shot, the man turned away from Life. “I’ll go call the others. That moron Illness is camping in the movie theater, so she can wait until later.”

“.....”

“What? I know you’re looking at me. I dunno what you’re thinking under that mask, but show a little more spine, wouldja? We’re the only ones on the ship with weapons like this. If they’ve got anything at all, it’s skeet-shooting rifles or the shotguns the security guards have for suppressing rioters. Anti-terror security measures have gone through the roof recently, so there’s no way any of the passengers smuggled anything on board.” He laughed. Now, they were the monsters who could lay waste to the ship. “We’re ready to tear this place up like *Alien*, so we gotta have a good time doin’ it.”

“It feels like cheating in a video game. It does weigh on my conscience a bit...”

For the first time, Life responded with something that almost resembled a joke, and the other man snorted on his way out of the room.

Once he was alone, as Life methodically checked through the contents of the remaining case, he murmured quietly.

“‘Ready to tear this place up,’ are you...?” There was irony in his words, but it wasn’t clear whether he was smiling or not. “I do hope that you won’t be defeated by the hero at the very, very last second.”

Life opened the next case, but its contents seemed completely unrelated to weapons or seajacks.

“After all, you people certainly aren’t Jason or Freddy. At best, you’re villains who happen to be hijacking a sea vessel.”

Inside were layer upon layer of pure-white masks, like the sort used in carnivals in Italian cities.

“The president didn’t even inform you of his true intentions—to steal other’s futures merely for the sake of business. After all, you are nothing but unprincipled, unthinking criminals. As am I.”

It was almost as if Life, his true face masked as well, were being reflected in an infinity mirror.

Picking up one of the masks, Life admonished himself aloud.

“...I’m talking to myself too much. It’s a disturbing habit. Even to me.”



Meanwhile, in the shipboard casino, Fontana di Trevi

“What the hell’s all this?”

As soon as he stepped into the room, Firo quietly caught his breath.

After the flashy departure ceremony, which had included fireworks and doves, Firo had changed from his tuxedo into a more comfortable jacket and toured the ship’s interior with Ennis and Czes.

Basically, the boat had everything.

Calling it everything was a little misleading, but most of the things Firo thought it should have were there, at least.

The restaurants weren't limited to haute cuisine; there were cheap hamburger shops, as well as everything from Italian through Japanese and Chinese, and even a place that served live honey ants, calling it "Australian natural cuisine."

In terms of shopping, it was as if they'd picked up an enormous mall and dropped it onto the ship, intact.

As you'd expect, the range of groceries for sale was limited, but they did have everything from high-end boutiques to sports shops, bookstores, toy stores, beauty salons, and even an arcade. There was a huge atrium in the center of the ship, and the shopping district was built around it in a multilevel circle. The roof of the atrium was clear acrylic, and during the day, mirrors directed natural sunlight inside.

The recreational facilities were even more abundant. Although there was no Ferris wheel and no go-carts (unsurprisingly), Firo had seen a wave pool. He couldn't say what it was exactly, but something seemed very wrong about having one of those on a boat.

There were tennis courts and a skeet shooting range as well, and Firo's impression of the *Entrance* was shifting from "moving castle" to "moving town."

Since they thought they should spend the first day getting used to their cabin, they'd ordered their dinner from room service.

Then, on Czes's recommendation, Ennis had decided to visit the beauty salon for women, and Firo had headed over to check out the casino while he waited for her, but—

Even if it was small, Firo did run a gambling den, and in his opinion, the shipboard casino was...

...dazzling. Brilliant. Truly magnificent.

On a ship this elegant, he'd expected this to be the one place where he could find a little less culture.

However, seeing it in person easily shattered his preconceived notions.

It's like a mini Las Vegas in here.

Multiple chandeliers hung from the ceiling.

The chips and cards all over the room reflected their light, generating a bewitching brightness.

There was poker and blackjack, naturally, but also roulette wheels, slot machines, and baccarat tables. They weren't betting arcade tokens but chips that would be exchanged for cash later. They were the one truth here. They were absolute power.

Apparently, you bought chips by credit card and paid for them later. Thinking he might learn something he could use at the Martillo Family's gambling parlors, Firo purchased a hundred dollars' worth.

Money called more money, and a momentary cheat or the merest trace of luck could change a life. To Firo, gambling dens were like a microcosm of life, and he'd even ripped the fingernails off customers who tried to pull a fast one on him, but—

—the tension unique to gambling parlors didn't really seem to exist here.

That said, it definitely was life in miniature.

"Okay, in that case, I'll send all my chips to the dealer this time," said one gentleman, moving what looked to be about thirty times the chips Firo had.

“I’ll keep going until I get lucky, and not a moment before!” said a lady, slapping a chip worth a thousand dollars to the “00” on the roulette wheel.

“Well, guess I lost today!”

A man who’d been relieved of all his chips in a one-on-one poker bet smiled at the man who’d taken them.

Of course, not everyone here was so free with their money. There were sensible gamblers whose spirits soared and fell over wins and losses of ten dollars or so—but they were participating in a quiet way, in the corners of the room. Maybe they didn’t feel comfortable here.

Oh.

Watching them smile even when they were frustrated, Firo began to understand.

To these guys, they might as well be playing with arcade tokens.

As he watched people enjoy gambling without the slightest consideration for profit and loss, Firo realized this place was *their* life in miniature.

In that case...

In that case, maybe he could get away with testing the experience he’d cultivated here. It might not be a bad idea to just bet on himself and see how much of this mountain of gold he could take home.

With that thought, Firo grinned—and quietly took a step forward.



Meanwhile On deck

Even though it was late at night, there were a lot of people out on the deck near the bow.

Some had come to look at the enormous shark installation there, while others were simply present to feel the wind and gaze at the stars. The rocking was rather pronounced here at the bow, but except for that, it didn't seem any different from a park near the coast, and a few couples were standing by the railings with arms around each other.

As he watched them in the distance, Bobby clicked his tongue in irritation.

"Dammit. Where's that Firo guy?"

"This place is like one big department store, after all. I doubt we'll have much luck finding him by wandering around at random... Want to try stealing the passenger list instead?" the black boy suggested.

"Shut up, Troy. Right now, that calm voice of yours just really ticks me off," Bobby snapped at him, then glanced at the friends behind him.

Troy, who collected Trojan horses—as in the computer viruses—as a hobby.

Tall, who was tall.

Humpty, who was fat.

Bobby had given them these nicknames; they were simple and easy to say, so he liked them. Of course, the individuals on the receiving end were openly unhappy with them, but Bobby turned a deaf ear to that.

What was giving him the most trouble right now was the question of how to deal with the girl who was standing beside them.

"Is something the matter? You seem to be looking for someone..."

"No, uh, listen. Before we get into that, I want to get one thing straight."

"Yes? What is it?"

"Who are you?"

After hours of silence, Bobby and the others had watched for their chance, then finally crept out of the lifeboat. The girl responsible for their inability to talk looked down apologetically.

"I'm sorry. I'm a stowaway, and my name is Carnea."

"You said that already. Not that I remembered it!" It wasn't a very fair thing to say, but then he asked her a quiet question. "So? Why'd you stow away?"

"...I'm searching for someone. Just like you."

"Looking for someone?"

"Yes. I'm sure he's on this ship. He's...sort of a father to me..." the girl said without looking up. Her skin was deeply tanned, but her personality seemed rather introverted.

"What, you pissed because your not-dad wouldn't take you along on his trip?"

"No, that isn't it. I came to stop him."

"Stop him?"

"Yes, he's—"

She would have gone on, but Bobby covered her mouth. "Hang on a sec."

"Mrgle!"

"Sorry, I'll listen to the rest of your story later."

Ushering everyone into the shadows by the wall, Bobby focused on the center of the deck.

A boy in a child's tuxedo was gazing at the shark robot. He seemed to be quite a bit younger than Bobby's group, but he was wandering around the ship alone, taking in the sights.

"Him... That's the one. Firo's kid brother."

"Oho. Indeed it is. I'm impressed, Bobby. Good job finding him; I'm shocked you managed it."

"I know, right? Keep the compliments coming, Troy."

Failing to realize that he was being mocked, the boy grinned, then decided to tail Czes. "Okay, we're going after him."

"Um... What are you planning to do afterward?" Carnea asked uneasily.

Bobby's smile was absolutely villainous. "Well, obviously, we'll... Uh, what should we do with him?" he asked Troy, Tall, and Humpty.

"We said we were going to take him hostage, but I seriously doubt you could successfully negotiate," said Troy.

"Plus, what would we do with him after we took him hostage?" added Tall. "Where are we supposed to lock him up?"

"Th-the crew might catch us before we nab that kid," Humpty said.

After so many pessimistic replies, Bobby froze up, still wearing that wicked smile—

—and then turned to Carnea, of all people.

"...What do you think we should do?" he said, revealing his complete lack of foresight.

"Um... What are you trying to do? Just bully that little kid?" Carnea drew back as she spoke, and Bobby hastily shook his head.

"No way! That's not it... The kid's big brother is an evil mafia exec, and his mafia group worked us over bad. We're gonna get revenge!"

His resentment was obviously misdirected, but Bobby's expression said that justice was on his side. "They're total scumbags. We worked our butts off to get something, and they reached right down and snatched it out of our hands! But we ain't sheep, and we're gonna let 'em know it. We've got the brains and the brawn to fight back!"

Completely ignoring the fact that he'd snatched a camera from a tourist, he waxed poetic, like a hero gearing up to strike back against an evil organization.

"Is that right...?" Ignoring his loud declaration, Carnea murmured, a little sadly, "It's the same everywhere, I guess."

But Bobby was too psyched up to hear the little voice, and only the other three boys heard him. Looking at one another, they decided to watch how things played out for now.

Then their leader, the one most in need of watching, set off after the enemy's little brother.

"C'mon, you guys, quit spacing out! We're going after that kid!"



"...Maybe I overdid it."

It had been two hours since he'd entered the casino, and Firo's attempt had been far more successful than he'd anticipated.

He hadn't been cheating. He'd merely used skillful conversation, watched his opponents' faces, and followed the basic logic of the various games, and yet—

Well, the bottom line was that a pile of chips worth a hundred thousand dollars was sitting in front of his hands.

After stepping inside, he'd gone on observing the clientele and spotted several veterans who were not only rich but used to gambling. Those people had the skill and the financial muscle to back it up, so he did his best to avoid going up against them.

He'd found the people who were still smiling even after getting skinned by those rich players, then kept winning a little and losing a little until the right moment, when he'd steer things into a high-stakes showdown.

Rinse and repeat, and the result was a mountain of chips.

I went overboard.

Objectively speaking, this is the stuff that makes a casino come after you.

If this had been his establishment, right about now he would have come out in person and offered to play a round so he could check to make sure he wasn't cheating.

However, even though he'd won all this by himself, the casino, the gamblers around him, and his opponents were just showering him with genuine compliments.

He wasn't hurting anyone, but for some reason, he was feeling guiltier and guiltier. Just as he was starting to think of calling it a night or maybe taking on one of the rich, seasoned gamblers he'd spotted earlier—

—a man in a black jacket and black leather pants sat down in the chair next to him. "Not bad, kid. How would you feel about going up against me, one-on-one?" he asked in an easygoing way.

However, it was clear at a glance that he wasn't an honest citizen.

Nothing about his appearance gave it away, but Firo could immediately sense that they were from the same world. Not only that but it was possible he was even deeper in that world than Firo.

He had the same dark, sharp air about him that Claire, Keith, and the higher Martillo executives had.

Firo was curious about what a man like that was doing on this ship, but he really wasn't qualified to talk, he realized. He decided to listen to what the man had to say.

"No, I just got a little lucky. I hope you're not expecting too much from me."

Shifting into the tone he usually used for work, Firo watched to see how the other man would respond.

"Don't be so modest. It's easy to tell when someone has good luck or good technique... Oh, don't worry; I'm not accusing you of cheating."

"....."

"I thought this place was just for fun; I didn't expect to run into someone like you here."

He was probably Spanish or South American. His skin was swarthy, and he had the face of a passionate and intense man. In terms of simple appearance, he'd probably be popular with the ladies.

As Firo was thinking, the man told the dealer, "Give me a deck of cards," then began to cut the deck he'd been handed.

And then—Firo saw it.

As the man shuffled cards almost too rapidly to register, one card slipped out of his sleeve and into the shifting deck.

No one around them had picked up on it. From where he was standing, the dealer probably hadn't seen it, either.

The man cut the card in dexterously, ending his shuffle once he'd moved it to the very top of the deck.

He's got some serious skills.

Firo was genuinely impressed, but he was also thinking about what that act had meant. As a cheat, there wasn't much point to it. They hadn't even decided what game to start yet, let alone who would deal.

And with his skills, the man could probably have slipped the card in too fast for even Firo if he'd wanted to.

Meaning the man must have intentionally let Firo see his cheat. That said, an ordinary person probably wouldn't have caught it, even if it was done right under their nose.

Is he testing me? Trying to figure out if I could catch that?

Smirking a little, Firo picked up the shuffled deck from the table. "In that case, it's my turn to cut, isn't it?"

Taking his false glasses out of his breast pocket, Firo put them on, smiled brightly—and effortlessly shuffled the cards, demonstrating even more skill than the man had earlier.

With a loud, crisp series of rapid-fire *fwips*, the cards mingled in a variety of ways.

And then—

"Whoops, sorry."

—as the cards danced between his hands, one slipped out and fell in front of the man in the black jacket.

Smiling awkwardly, as though he'd messed up, Firo set the deck of cards in front of his opponent. He made no attempt to pick up the one he'd dropped.

The man retrieved the card that had fallen in front of him, grinned back at him, and began to cut the cards again.

In the next instant, the card Firo had intentionally dropped went back where it belonged: up the man's sleeve. Again, Firo had only seen it because the man wanted him to.

"All right," the man said, smiling quietly. "What shall we play?"

The upshot was that Firo won their subsequent game of blackjack.

At first, they'd played an intense, gloves-off bout bringing all their tactics to bear, but—

—the moment the stakes got high, the man had summarily gone bust.

"A total loss. You really do know your stuff; that's all I can say. You kept your cool all the way to the end."

"...Thanks." Firo was smiling, but internally, he had his doubts.

That really looked like he lost on purpose...

Although he was suspicious, Firo kept his smile in place on the surface as the man quietly held a hand out to him.

"I haven't introduced myself yet. I'm Angelo. I'm in the export-import business."

"It's a pleasure. I'm Firo Prochainezo. I manage a restaurant."

When he returned the handshake, the man who'd called himself Angelo shook his head apologetically. "During that last match, I'm afraid you won more than I have chips to cover. If you don't mind, I'll treat you to a drink in my room. What do you say?"

"...Just for a little while, maybe."

Angelo had clearly been gunning for this development.

Hmm? Did I do something to get myself on the wrong side of any South Americans or Spaniards?

He and Luck Gandor had crushed a small syndicate in Mexico once, but that was more than fifty years ago. He doubted anyone would be trying to get revenge for that now.

As sundry other questions ran through his mind, Firo gave in to his curiosity and decided to play along. If he failed to sound the guy out here and got himself shot in front of Ennis or Czes later on, he really wouldn't be able to look them in the face again.

"All right. In that case, I'll swing by."

Telling the attendant to change his chips into cash, Firo stood up slowly. He'd be leaving the ship with enough money to cover their fares and then some, but even that fact had slipped his mind. He was worried about just one thing.

Now, if this guy's just hitting on me...how am I going to get away?



The girl known as Illness was, as her name suggested, ill.

That was what the people around her had determined and what she herself had wished for.

Then she could say it was because she was sick.

Because she was diseased.

I'm not normal, so—

She'd believed that if she was ill, the things she was doing could be accepted.

She'd also been well aware this was just a delusion.

And so she'd tried to be human, but the people around her wouldn't let her. No matter what she did, they always said the same things: "You're weird," "You're abnormal," "You are not okay."

Illness knew you were supposed to get mad when people said such things, so she always yelled back at them, but—

—nobody took it as a proper reaction.

They thought her belief that she was ill was a form of escapism. They thought she was running away from the truth.

And as she listened to what the people around her said and how they reacted, a fear took root inside her:

Am I actually weird?

If the behavior of the people around her was any indication, the answer to that question was yes.

From a broader perspective—or from hers, at least—the answer was probably neither yes nor no.

She thought to herself about it.

The strangeness had always been there, ever since she was born. Not in herself but in her environment.

That, and in the objective of the parents who'd given birth to her.

Illness's body was covered in scars, hidden beneath her clothes.

There were all kinds of them, from smaller injuries after being hit or cut all the way up to having bits gouged out or her skin ripped apart.

However, her parents had told her that this was right.

The people around her had said so, too.

"It isn't because you've done anything wrong," her parents had said. "Just relax; don't worry."

Then, smiling—her father had stripped the skin off her back.

It was a fairy tale in the woods.

A grisly story set in a European-style mansion, deep in the forest.

A tale from long, long ago.

An old, old fairy tale from seven years before.

This fairy tale began with a small girl's screams.

Most of them were inarticulate. Even on the few occasions she managed to scream something coherent, it didn't mean anything.

It hurts, she'd shriek, can't breathe, it stings, it itches, it burns, it's so, so, so cold, but the people around her just kept praying.

Not for her safety. They were praying to her screams, treating them as an object of worship.

Bring us good fortune, they prayed. We were happy today. Thank you.

They stood before the sobbing girl and did nothing but pray to her pain.

Even then, the girl didn't say *Help me*. She'd been taught that help was something she gave to others.

The girl, who didn't even have the name "Illness" yet...

...didn't know what it truly meant to cry for help.

For that reason, she didn't pick up on the significance of the things that were done to her.

She didn't know that there was an unfamiliar world that wasn't painful or hot or harsh.

She didn't know there was a world where she wouldn't have to get her fingernails ripped out.

Or a world where she wouldn't have to get divots of flesh gouged out of various places around her body.

Where she could live without having her ribs taken out, engraved with letters, then returned to her.

Where she wouldn't have to starve for two weeks, then be treated to a feast laced with poison that still wouldn't grant her the release of death.

Where she wouldn't be ordered to kill a girl her own age after a year together.

Just before the girl died at Illness's hands, she'd been rescued by the spectators.

Then the people around Illness bound her. Once the girl had recovered, she came back for her violent revenge.

Illness didn't know there was a world where such a thing was unthinkable.

She didn't know a thing, and she didn't try to learn.

After all, they'd taken everything from her—the possibility that any other world existed and even her thoughts.

That is, until she was nine years old and some children a little older than she was snuck into the Sanctuary.

Until she became friends with them.

Until they were nice enough to tell her that she was weird.

Until they were kind enough to say they wouldn't let the adults around her get away with everything they'd done.

Until they tried to save her.

Until they told her about a new world.

Until, when they were just one step away from succeeding, the people around her caught them—and slaughtered them.

I'm the one who killed them.

It's because I told them.

Because I was jealous of a world where you didn't have to get hurt.

Because I asked for help.

That's why they came to save me, and that's why they all died, every last one.

Even then, they never stopped trying until the very end.

My father told the last survivor...

"That is my precious, beloved daughter. If you gouge out one of her eyes, I'll spare your life."

But that boy...

He took the knife they gave him and told me to run, then slashed at my father.

But my father had a gun.

And that was the end of that child's story.

But the fairy tale in the woods didn't end there.

Father saw me crying.

"We were wrong," he said.

As smoke coiled up from his gun, her father had apologized to the girl and to everyone else—

—and after that, the girl learned about the world.

They told her all sorts of things about what lay beyond the forest.

They showed her TV programs. Picture books. Even Japanese comics. They gave her music and movies, taught her just how much hope there was in the world and how the children around her lived, and then—

“Ignorance dulls the pain, doesn’t it?”

—and then they did the exact same things to the girl as before.

The people kept praying to her, treating her as an object of reverence.

They said she wasn’t human.

They said she was a child of God.

One year later, a group of men suddenly came to the mansion, then shot and killed her parents.

From what she heard later, the father of one of the boys who’d been killed a year ago was a director at a major corporation somewhere, and he’d hired them—the Mask Makers—to do this job.

When one of the Mask Makers had found the girl with chains on both arms, both legs, and her tongue, he trained his gun on her. “You’re pretty obviously a victim,” he said. “What do I do now...? They did say to kill everybody inside.”

Listening to him, the girl learned that her own parents, the other adults, and even the children were dead, and she simply thought, *Oh, good.*

Her thoughts were vague, but she was glad they’d died without suffering the same pain she did.

She should have despised them. She’d cried when the boy was killed, but she didn’t hate them, and she didn’t think it served them right. That meant she was weird, didn’t it?

“Got any last words?” asked the man with the gun, and the girl answered him.

“Say, am I human? Or am I a god?”

At that, the man gave an awkward smile. “I see, I see. They told us to kill the people, but nobody said anything about killing gods.”

With that—she was taken out of the mansion.

And that was the end of the story in the woods.

The story that came after that one wasn’t all that much fun, either, she knew.

After she became affiliated with an organization known as the Mask Makers, they’d taught her what she needed to know in order to live among them.

It had hurt, but it was a different sort of pain from what had been done to her in the forest.

They’d trained her to kill people.

She definitely wasn’t in the woods anymore, but this wasn’t the new world she’d learned about, either. Still, now that she knew what was possible, she didn’t want to die on the streets.

If she said she didn’t want to kill people, they’d probably kill her—and if they didn’t, she was pretty sure they’d drive her away, and she wouldn’t be able to survive on her own.

Every time Illness wondered whether she was ill or not, her past came back to her.

It convinced her that she really was strange.

She believed without a doubt that she was sick.

She believed normal people wouldn't kill others just because they valued their own lives.

She believed that if they were confronted with the choice she'd been given, people could choose to die with no hesitation.

After all, she'd seen it—if only she hadn't.

What had saved her were the boys who'd tried to help her.

...And their deaths.

To her, they had symbolized the world.

What she was doing didn't match what they'd done. What a strange person she must be, thinking she didn't want to die.

Believing that she was truly sick—she'd listlessly gone to work today, as she always did.



The shipboard movie theater

“Hic... Hig...”

The girl called Illness was, as her name suggested, rather ill.

The people who knew her thought so, and given her current state, everyone nearby probably agreed, too.

The enormous cinema complex was located near the stern of the ship. The theater was actually an aggregate of seven small theaters, and for the duration of this voyage, they were showing what they'd termed *The Shark Flight Collection*: Claudia's most prominent films and previous works by director John Drox.

What she was watching was one of Claudia's major films: *Attack of the Killer Edisons*.

Edison's spirit phone, an invention from his later years, has made a comeback in the modern era—until it's possessed by a dreadful demon queen! One after another, Edison's inventions are possessed by evil spirits and begin attacking people! Beware! The lightbulb is your enemy!

...And so on. It was one of those movies that absolutely anyone would call dumb, and the announcement that Claudia would be starring in it—and as the childlike demon queen, no less—had shocked the world.

This had happened immediately after she'd been universally acclaimed for her performance in her previous film, *The Wild Dog in the Wind*, as a girl whose parents had been killed by a police officer, kickstarting her career as an actress with genuine skills.

However, even in this ridiculous film, she'd given a brilliant performance as an evil young villainess, and the world had dubbed her "Claudia-of-All-Trades," a nickname that might have been an honor—or perhaps not.

That aside, of the movies in which Claudia starred, this one was considered particularly extreme, and among serious Claudia buffs, you didn't count as a true fan unless you'd seen it at least ten times.

After the climax of this universally acknowledged stupid movie (the scene after the ghost of Nikola Tesla sends the evil queen plunging into hell, when she reveals her final trump card and declares that she has taken the movie audience itself hostage), Illness was sniffing.

"Hic...higuuu..."

The other audience members had no idea what she'd found in the movie to cry about, and they worried she might have a stomachache or something. However, her peculiar appearance was a bit too much for them, and they couldn't bring themselves to go up and talk to her.

After a little while longer, the movie ended, and as the credits began to roll, Illness applauded enthusiastically at the screen.

As soon as the movie was over, the bemused audience began to get up and leave, but Illness kept gazing at the screen, teary-eyed.

Finally, she was all by herself, and when silence had descended over the theater—

“Are you okay, miss?”

Difficult as she was to approach, someone had spoken to her.

“Hic... Who are you?”

Wiping her eyes, Illness answered with an unrelated question, and the boy in front of her giggled. “My name is Thomas... Well, not really. It’s actually Czeslaw Meyer. Call me Czes,” he said, handing her a handkerchief, and Illness smiled through her tears.



“Hic. Thank you, Czes. Although I don’t know why you lied and said you were Thomas.”

“Don’t worry about it. It’s just something I always do.”

“?”

Bewildered, Illness dried her tears with the handkerchief. Normally, you’d expect so much eye shadow to run, but tears apparently weren’t enough to smudge it.

Seeing this, Czes began to wonder if the dark circles were real or possibly tattoos, but he decided not to ask.

“Why were you crying?”

The question reminded Illness of the reason behind her tears, even if she didn’t really understand it herself.

As she struggled to put the pieces together, the memory that came to mind was...

A conversation she’d had that evening with a certain movie star.



You must be a good person! the star had declared with absolutely no reserve or hesitation, and Illness had felt simultaneously delighted and guilty.

If nothing changed, the girl was bound to get involved. Illness’s group was going to jack the ship, and that meant Claudia, too. As long as she was on this ship, that was an incontrovertible fact.

Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaah, aaaaaaaaaaaah, what’ll I do? What should I do...?

Similar things had happened several times before.

On some of those occasions, she'd tried to do something about it.

But every time, Death or Life had said, "You're being unprofessional," and gotten in her way.

Well, I'm not a professional. I'm an amateur. That means it's okay for me to save the people I want to save, she thought, even if the logic wasn't totally sound.

Still, she hadn't been able to defy them or the president; instead, she had prioritized her own life and plummeted into self-hatred, but—
—today was different.

Naturally, the president wasn't on this ship, and Death was dead. Aging was on *the other ship*, and from what she heard, Life would be coming later, but right now, he wasn't here.

So it's fine, isn't it? Isn't it?

It was incredibly simplistic.

Incredibly thoughtless.

She was a member of a mysterious organization that was planning to hijack this ship for their business, and she was the most heavily armed of all her companions on board—but she had no trouble saying the one thing she shouldn't.

"Um, listen, Claudia?"

"What?"

Claudia was wearing a confident smile, while the other girl's face was listless.

"Is there any way you could get off this ship now?"

"? Why?"

“Well, um, I can’t tell you why, but something really awful might happen. If you can’t, then you should probably stay as close to a lifeboat as possible, okay?”

Claudia had casually struck up a conversation and said she was a good person, and that was enough for Illness to reveal the outrageous truth.

It was a betrayal of her organization, but as far as Illness was concerned, it was nothing of the sort.

After all, I’m not telling her anything specific.

This excuse, which did little to excuse anything, was already a legitimate reason in her mind.

“Where’d that come from? Whoa, can you see the future, Illness?” Claudia asked, perplexed.

Illness cocked her head, seeming troubled.

If there had been any businessmen around, they would have been hysterical, and they would have done far worse than shout at her. But Illness couldn’t have cared less. Without saying anything specific, she simply gave Claudia a warning.

“N-no. I can’t do that, but, um... Ahh, I can’t say. I can’t tell you, but... Anyway, it’s going to be terrible!” She flailed her arms around, then whirled toward the shark again, as if she meant to forget the whole thing.

She touched the shark’s realistically textured skin, putting the whole awkward conversation behind her, and began playing around with the animatronic.

There was a short silence as the movie star reflected on what she’d said.

Then she drew a breath.

"Say, Illness? Are you a good person? Or are you a bad one?" Claudia asked.

Illness had been admiring the shark's movements up close when Claudia suddenly leaned in from beside her to get a good look at her face.

"Uh, huh?"

"Are you telling me you're planning to do something to this ship?"

Wow! She's really sharp! I mean, I haven't said anything, but...!

"N-n-no! I don't know a thing!"

It was true. She'd heard they were going to attempt a seajack, but they hadn't filled her in on a single one of the specifics.

All they'd told her was, You're insurance. If the police show up in a helicopter or a high-speed boat, getting rid of them is your job. Meaning if everything goes well, you won't have to do a thing.

Illness was struggling to recover from Claudia's question, and her eyes swam wildly.

"In that case," Claudia said, "just tell me one thing: Are you a good person or a bad one?"

Illness was getting anxious as Claudia drove closer to the heart of the matter, crazy as it was, and so her answer was far, far more to the point than the other girl's question had been.

"Umm... If killing people is a bad thing, I might be a reeeeeeally bad person..."

"....."

Huh? Did I just say something I shouldn't have?

Just as her composure was returning, the meaning of her own words struck her, and she began shuddering violently.

“Oh! Uh, the thing is...”

It was too late.

Even before she understood specifically what she’d done wrong, her mind knew that she’d passed the point of no return. Plain as day, she’d said something no normal person ever would. She’d revealed she was patently weird.

Her already sickly face twisted further, as if she was about to cry, but—

“Hmm.”

—Claudia was an even weirder girl than she was.

“Well, good or bad, I like people who are honest, you know.”

“Huh...?”

“Besides, you were worried about me, weren’t you? So you’re a good person as far as I’m concerned! Killing people is bad, and if you kill someone I care about, I won’t let you off easy, but *my great-grandfather is a legendary hitman*, and he never would’ve married my great-grandmother if he wasn’t. It’s why I exist at all, so I can’t pretend I’m any better than you.”

Still wearing that confident smile, the redheaded girl made a bold declaration to the older girl.

“So have a little faith in yourself! Even if the whole world tries to shun you, I, Claudia Walken, will acknowledge you! To me, you’re a good person, so I’ll let you into my world, and that’s that! Oh, but one thing. Starting now, you’ll need to cut back on the bad things you do, all right? I don’t want part of my world getting herself shot and killed by the police!”

“Um...”

“When it’s time to kill you, I’ll do it myself. So don’t do anything reckless, okay?”

Maybe it was an arrogant thing to say or maybe it was just dumb, but Claudia meant every word. After her speech, she nodded firmly.



Nobody’s ever said anything like that to me before.

The girl’s words had stuck with Illness. Illness wanted to know more about her, and so she’d come to see one of her movies, but—

—she’d already seen three this evening, and in every one of them, Claudia was different.

Claudia seemed to have everything Illness herself lacked. She seemed to know everything. But she was only pretending. Just acting out various roles. Illness understood that.

Still. Even so.

On the screen, she always shone.

Her light always shone the same no matter what its color—villain, tragic heroine, or anything else. Sometimes it was dark; sometimes it was piercing. If she had a flaw, it was that when she played a supporting character, she shone too brightly.

The world smiled on her.

She’d been blessed with everything: status, talent, and even luck.

Not only that, but she’d probably won all those things for herself through sheer skill.

So what had made Illness cry?

Because someone as dazzlingly talented as Claudia had acknowledged her?

Or because Illness was mortified, knowing that all she deserved was contempt?

She thought, but she couldn't find the answer.

However, remembering the way the girl had sparkled, both on the screen and when she'd met her in real life, Illness started tearing up again.

"Wha...? Wh-why are you crying again?"

Czes hastily tried to comfort the girl, unsure what was going on with her emotions.

He was used to a certain crybaby from his past, at least, but this one seemed to be a different type.

Czes wasn't exactly into comforting crying girls in movie theaters to begin with, but something else in their surroundings was bothering him, and he'd schemed to get close to her in order to learn more about it.

"Oh, in that case, would you like to go back to your room, miss? I'll go with you."

As the girl wiped her eyes, she looked at Czes and snickered through her tears.

"Hee-hee! You're a little young to be seducing girls, you know. Maybe when you're ten years older."

"Shall I try again in another century or so?" Czes answered the girl's joke with irony directed at himself. "Assuming you're still alive then."

And so Czes ended up escorting the girl, who'd introduced herself as Illness, back to her room.

She told him her cabin was on a lower level, near the bow, and the trip there took far longer than expected. At several points along the

way, he'd intentionally taken a detour, and when they'd gone down the stairs, he was certain.

I'm being followed.

He didn't know how many of them there were or their physiques, but he was being shadowed by a group of people, more than two.

In crowded areas, they hung back. When traffic thinned out, they came closer.

He'd caught glimpses of them before going to the movie theater, and the crying girl had provided the perfect opportunity to determine that he was in fact being tailed. If he managed to maneuver his way into her room, he'd probably be able to get a good look at what was going on outside. He'd also considered going back to his own room, but he didn't like the idea of showing his opponents where that was.

He'd ended up pulling in someone uninvolved, but maybe he could patch things up after he'd nailed down what the other group was after. The thought was cold, as Czes could sometimes be, but at the moment, his fear was stronger than anything.

Ever since he ran into that man in black in the corridor that afternoon, he'd felt vaguely uneasy.

And for no particular reason—he was remembering that train.

He'd traveled by train and boat many times since then. He'd been terrified at first, but after several years, the phobia had faded. And yet this time...

The ship was far more spacious than the train, and Firo and Ennis, family he could trust, were here with him. Even so, he had a nasty premonition he couldn't seem to shake.

That creeping feeling was as bad as the time he'd visited that isolated village in Northern Europe the previous year—no, even worse than that.

What is this chill? I feel like I just ran into an unusually happy Victor on the street.

Victor Talbot was an immortal who made Czes uncomfortable.

He hadn't done the immortal any actual harm, but he often did things like mercilessly dig up and expose the past, including the past Czes would rather forget. Victor probably believed it was the right thing to do, but as far as Czes was concerned, it was nothing but trouble.

Was it going to happen again here? Were the parts of himself he hated going to come to light again?

Or would he have a direct run-in with terror, as he had on the train?

Both?

Argh. Enough; just stop. Don't think about it so much; there are more important things now. Focus on whoever's following you...

As Czes was working out his future plans, Illness, beside him, abruptly stopped in her tracks.

"What's wrong?"

"Oh, I'm sorry, Czes. There's nobody around right now, so I'll tell you."

"Wh-what?"

Wait, this girl isn't going to attack me here, is she?!

His situation might be about to take a hard turn. He wasn't sure what she planned to do and whether he should consider a fight from the girl welcome or not, but what really worried him was the possibility that he'd be attacked by the group who was shadowing him while he dealt with it.

Maybe it was a mature worry to have or maybe not, but while he was wrestling with it, Illness's eyes gleamed sharply above their dark circles.

"I'm sorry, Czes. It looks like I'm being tailed."

"Huh?"

"Hmm. They're all on the small side, so they might be kids. Four boys and one girl, maybe? But some boys walk like girls these days, so that might not be right."

"Wait, what are you talking about?"

For a moment, Czes didn't understand what she was even saying, and he started to ask her what was going on.

But Illness just sniffed at the air and said, "I don't smell any gas, so don't worry, okay?"

And in the next moment—

"I'll just go grab them. The area's nice and deserted now anyway."

—Czes realized something.

They were already below the lowest passenger cabins, on a stairway leading to the engine room and the storerooms.

That's weird. I thought I was the one setting the route.

There was a door at the bottom of the stairs with a sign on it that said NO ENTRY.

Did she lure the group tailing us down here? And...me, too?

While Czes was still wondering about this, the girl leaped—but with so much force that it looked more like she'd been launched from a catapult.

Setting a foot on the railing of the rather narrow stairwell, she kicked the wall and traveled to the top of the stairs in one jump.

Hastily, Czes ran up the steps after her, but by the time he reached the top, she'd already flung herself into the corridor on the upper level. The way she bounded down the hallway, she was almost running along the walls.

No human can move like that, Czes thought, but he quickly corrected himself. *No normal human can move like that*.

He could think of several other people who reminded him of ninjas in a movie.

Nile, Denkurou, Christopher, Charon...

As several names surfaced in his mind, there was one that he was very careful not to think of.

"Ahhh-ha-ha-ha-ha-haaah. Ah-haaaah?"

She launched herself off the corridor wall...

...kicked a doorknob...

...flipped upside down and kicked the ceiling...

...then kicked the opposite wall and returned to the corridor.

It was completely ridiculous. She ran, sprinted, flew down the corridor as if she'd chosen to ignore the laws of gravity.

It wasn't even clear whether there was a point to all her zipping around. Her movements were nonsensical—or maybe her trajectory, to be precise. So much so you might wonder whether it was intended to keep an opponent with a gun from drawing a bead on her.

And watching her, Czes finally arrived at the name he didn't want to remember.

She's almost like...

The...Rail...Tracer...

As he whispered the name, a chill raced down his spine, and traumatic flashbacks flooded his mind.

Desperately holding back the wave of panic, Czes shook his head, dispelling the illusion.

No, she's not him! She's not on that level; she's still about like Nile...

As incoherent thoughts began to surface in his mind...

"...Huh?"

Czes calmed down enough to process the fact that Illness had some very unique abilities, much more than her appearance suggested. Then he heard screams from the far end of the corridor, followed by a playful call. "Czeees, I caught three of 'emmmm!"

"...Did I blow it?"

Too late, he realized that he'd just stepped into the extraordinary of his own accord.



Meanwhile, in a shipboard corridor

As Illness was bounding around the semi-suite floor...

Some distance away, on the floor of normal cabins, Angelo was showing Firo into his own room.

"So you're in a suite, Firo? Well, how about that. I'm jealous."

"Nah, it's too good for me. I don't know what to do with myself."

"It's a problem you're lucky to have. Would you like to trade me for my normal cabin?"

Just as they arrived at the room, Angelo's cell phone rang and interrupted their conversation.

“...Excuse me.”

Angelo put a little distance between himself and Firo, then answered the call.

A coarse voice issued from the speaker. *“Heya, Mr. Angelo, how’s it going? Didn’t expect to see ya in the casino back there. There you were, just hangin’ out with another guy like us, playin’ cards.”*

“...Yes, sir, it’s been a while.”

“Whoops, is he close by? Eh, don’t worry; just gimme some random responses. You’ve got great timing, you know that? Before I went to the casino, I left some goodies in your room. Thanks for leaving the door open a crack like I asked; that was a big help.”

“You do sound like you’re well; I’m glad to hear it. I’m traveling on a ship right now; will you be able to manage the phone charges?”

Angelo played along impassively.

The caller—the demolition guy—cackled and kept up the pointless conversation.

“Got me there. I’m calling from the same boat, and it still has to go from here through the satellite and back. Meeting face-to-face would be a hell of a bargain.”

“Yes, I’d love to see you again.”

“No way. I dunno how many times I told you to bring somethin’ formal, and you didn’t have one lousy tux. The whole casino thought you were a movie star, you know, on account of some event they’re doin’ on board. You might as well be goddamned Antonio Banderas; I don’t want to go around with you and have people remembering my face.”

“No, I’m very sorry, but I’m keeping a guest waiting. I’ll call you back later.” Angelo hung up and gave Firo a wry smile. “My apologies. I got a call from an uncle I’m not on the best of terms with.”

“Yes, I guessed it was something like that.”

Firo smiled back at him mildly, and a lukewarm silence ran between the two of them.

Angelo was the first to break it as he opened the door—and invited his disreputable guest into the room.

“This isn’t half bad.”

Firo looked around the normal cabin, sounding impressed.

In terms of price, it cost a tenth of what his suite room had. That said, the cabin was a smaller version of a relatively upscale hotel room, and if there was just one occupant, it was probably just right.

There was no balcony, so guests could only enjoy the view through a window, but watching the summertime ocean go by from an air-conditioned room was a fairly dignified pastime on its own.

A single crate meant for liquor bottles sat on a round table near the back of the room.

“Now then, I’ll treat you to that drink. I just bought some good stuff in the shipboard mall.”

Angelo gave him a genial smile, and Firo smiled back fearlessly.

“I appreciate it. And I won’t take any more than those chips were worth.”

The two sat down on opposite sides of the table, and Angelo silently set a hand on the lid of the crate.

A liquor crate, huh?

Gazing at it, Firo thought back to when he’d first become an immortal. It was sobering to think that if he hadn’t taken an interest in that crate, the person he was now would never have existed.

Firo had begun to fall into a pensive mood, but...

“By the way, Firo.”

...when Angelo interrupted those thoughts, Firo instantly shifted mental gears.

“About the company that runs your restaurant.”

“Yes?”

“It wouldn’t be called the Mask Makers, would it?”

“ — ”

What the heck is that? Firo almost asked the question on reflex, but—

—his memories stopped him.

The Mask Makers.

If common sense applied, the words probably meant exactly what they seemed to mean—people who made masks. That was all, plain and simple.

...But some of Firo’s memories were sounding a sudden alarm.

That’s a special word—be careful, be careful, they warned him.

Whose memories were they? Was it something he’d seen or heard over the course of his long life?

No.

Were they memories from Szilard’s life, acquired when he’d eaten the man?

No.

This was deeper than that.

The system of memories was shaped like a tree, with many smaller branches forming offshoots from Szilard’s great trunk.

These were the memories of people Szilard had eaten or the memories one of those alchemists had eaten in their time.

serial murderer Italy a lord who's fond of women
a drug Father made a mysterious phantom sacrificed children
the Rotten Eggs older brother Begg Garrott

Gretto.

They're Maiza's kid brother's memories.

As he scanned the hazy, distant memories, he realized there was one more—

To one other person, the words *the Mask Maker* had a special meaning.

the children's tragedy two boys two girls

Monica Niki criminal organization

band of mercenaries gold gold gold death gold gold gold one, yet
legion

Lebreau.

The instant he realized which alchemist the memories belonged to,
Firo aborted his dive.

I can't.

I can't look at Lebreau's memories.

Firo felt an intense aversion to examining that memory set.

Compared to the other immortals, he could see only fragments,
maybe because the man had been eaten by another alchemist
before Szilard had eaten that person. In terms of his own
recollections, they felt like memories from when he was between the
ages of three and five or so.

Even then, if he went in deeper, he might be able to remember more vividly, but Firo felt he couldn't afford to know too much about Lebreau.

That's right. I can't make his memories my own. After all, Lebreau—

Firo was abruptly yanked back to reality and out of his thoughts.

He'd only been thinking about the Mask Makers for a few seconds, but that had been more than enough to raise Angelo's suspicions.

"I thought so. You do know something."

His card handling was nothing compared to the speed at which a shiny black handgun with gaudy gold-and-red ornamentation appeared right in front of Firo's eyes.

It was like a scene straight out of a movie.

Simply and calmly, the gunman shoved reality in Firo's face.

"So let's hear it. Tell me about the Mask Makers."

"About your boss—and the guy who ordered the hit on mine. Everything you know."



Meanwhile, on the bridge

Captain.

As the literal head of the ship, he was in charge of everything about the voyage.

However, unlike the captains of ordinary fishing vessels, ferries, or pirate ships, the captain of a luxury cruise ship like the *Entrance* needed far more than the usual requisite skills as a navigation officer, engineer, and charismatic leader of a crew.

This magnificent ship had everything—cabin service that befitted an enormous hotel, various stores in the shopping mall, and myriad types of entertainment and recreational facilities—and the ultimate person in charge of all of it was its captain.

As the one responsible for maintaining the safety of their voyage, he was required to show himself to the passengers, and he sometimes had to respond to unfair requests from guests as well. In order to lighten his load, he had appointed mates, hotel managers, and other assistants for each department before tackling the difficult work himself.

In movies, captains sometimes sipped wine and chatted with passengers, and this was also true to life. He had to ensure that his guests had the best time possible while not getting drunk himself, no matter how many glasses of wine he imbibed, and keeping a careful eye on the situation around him.

With this in mind, Folk Connor, captain of the *Entrance*, had been patrolling the ship, making sure all was in order, when the call came from the bridge.

After he made his way back, he calmly opened the door.

“What’s the matter, Chief Mate—”

And suddenly, a gun was pressed against his back.

“Right, great work.”

Then the captain noticed: In addition to the man who was holding him at gunpoint, there were ten or so “outsiders” on the bridge. They were dressed in completely different ways, but all of them wore elegant masks like the ones used at Italian festivals.

He would have loved to believe they were drunks who’d slipped out in the middle of a party, but unfortunately, there were no plans for a masquerade ball on the ship.

In addition, every member of the masked group held guns with very intimidating designs, showing that they were more than a disorderly mob. The captain trusted his intuition that said those guns were real.

He stood motionless and spoke gravely. "I was informed that a large ship of unknown nationality had appeared on the radar."

"Too bad. It's made up; we made your chief mate lie."

He looked over and saw another man had a gun to the chief mate's head. "I see. I'm glad to hear there's no danger of a collision." Even as he gritted his teeth, the captain worked hard to stay calm and keep his voice subdued. "In that case, no outsiders are allowed on the bridge, so I'll have to ask you to leave."

"No can do, but I'm sure you already knew that." Wearing an unpleasant smile, one of the masked attackers walked up to the captain. "Some people like to wait to snuff out that last ray of hope, but that isn't our style, so I'll tell you right up front: We've occupied everything from the communications room on up, so you won't be sending out an SOS."

"....."

"Hey, don't look at me like that. We're not about to tell you to assemble all the passengers in the hall or anything. In fact, we want the passengers to continue their wonderful little voyage in total ignorance! I'm serious! At times like this, if you announce the seajack to the passengers, some special ops guy who just happens to be on board might find a way to get the word out or mess with the plan."

The hijacker told his frivolous story with an equally flippant smile.

Naturally, no ship sailed without taking the possibility of a seajack into account. There were quite a few VIPs on this ship, and they'd flattered themselves that the security was flawless, but—

“All right, here’s a question for you.” The hijacker seemed to sneer at that idea as he spread his arms wide. “If we’re taking over a ship this big, just how many of us do you think there are? How much weaponry do you think we brought in?”

“.....”

“The answer is, that’s a secret. You can check the passenger list if you want to, but we’re legit. Here’s a big hint, though: Not all of us boarded at the port. I’m not gonna tell you how.”

The hijacker was having a blast with this, and the captain ground his molars hard.

“Also, all the weapons are real. After what happened last year, what with terror countermeasures and all, security’s gotten seriously strict; you know how it is. You would not believe how hard it was to get this much heavy equipment on board.” The man proudly brandished the assault rifle in his hands.

There was a spare gun hanging from his waist, too, and for a moment, the captain considered grabbing it, but he understood that it wouldn’t be enough to turn the tides here.

“So let’s get straight to the point. We haven’t set a bomb in the engine room, and all your thousand or so staff members are walking free. Frankly, at this point in time, the only people who know something’s wrong with the ship are the people in here, in the communications room, and in the engine room.”

“What are you getting at?” The captain asked, and the men snickered before giving him his answer.

“Well, you see, the most important points we’ve seized are the ship’s ventilation control system and all the vents.”

“What...!”

“This ship is really something, isn’t it? From one single room, you can manage the air-conditioning for everything—from the passenger cabins to the leisure facilities and even the temperature in the storerooms. I mean, geez, it’s even got a forced-air system.”

As he explained, the man lowered his rifle and took a small bottle out of his jacket. It was an eau de cologne for men, a product from a famous manufacturer, which was also sold on the ship.

When he twisted the cap once, there was an odd *click* inside the bottle.

“So about this stuff...” A second later, he sprayed the cologne right at the face of the nearby chief mate.

“What are you—! Ghk...ungh...ga...ka-kah-kah-ka-ka-ka-ka-ka-ka-ka-ka-ka! Ka-ka-kah-kah-ah... ..!”

The chief mate collapsed on the spot, clawing at the floor and gurgling with a noise like an insect. He flailed like a small animal on the verge of suffocation, and while he didn’t actually die, it took him a very, very long time to settle down.

“There. That’s what happens when you get just a puff of the stuff. Two hits in a row are fatal ninety percent of the time. So given what I was just telling you about the vents...I think you get the picture.”

“Why you...!”

Ignoring the murderous fury in the captain’s glare, the man quietly turned on his heel. “I don’t wanna give you the wrong idea, so let me tell you this: None of the passengers know about what’s going on. If you people just sit tight and behave, they’ll reach their destination without ever finding out. But if the police or anybody like that shows up—well, I don’t have to spell it out, do I?”

“What do you want? Money?”

“Yep. This is business, after all. I mean, *I hear our president’s personal grudge is also involved*, but whatever.”

The man replied without even blinking, and then he and his companions all laughed.

Their laughter irritated the captain. “Do you think our company will pay the ransom so easily?” he shot back fearlessly.

“Annnd that’s a negative, chief.” The hijacker snapped his fingers and pointed at the captain, right between the eyes. “You got us all wrong; if we radioed your parent company, you know they’d run straight to the police. Nope, no way, N-O. We aren’t planning to steal any money from your company. It’s just that if we don’t get control of the bridge, at least, *they might not believe us over there.*”

“Wha...? What?” the captain asked incredulously, but the hijackers’ representative cheerfully went on. “Listen, when it comes to movies, I always wonder: Why is it that seajacks and hijacks fail?”

“Because evil cannot prevail.”

“I mean, yeah, you’re not wrong, but damn, Cap, talk about cool under fire... Anyway, I think the problem is that there’s a hero within striking distance.”

“...?”

The marauder had said something odd, and the captain eyed him suspiciously.

But the man shook his head wearily at no one in particular, then impassively relayed some important information.

“Well, there’s no reason to hide it at this point, so I’ll tell you: We’re negotiating with those hero types. I mean, they’re not fighting for truth, justice, and the American way or anything like that, but from what I hear, they have some kind of special power, and if they see any hostages, they’ll save them without thinking of themselves. Well,

our president's the only one who knows specifically what kind of people they are, but anyway." As the man rambled on, he struck an exaggerated pose, then leaned in until his face was inches from the captain's. "...And so. This is something you could only do with twin ships like these."

"No... Don't tell me..."

"Yep. If you take both boats hostage at once—"

The man paused deliberately, then revealed the truth of the situation with utter delight.

"The heroes are only on one of the ships, so there's nothing they can do. See?"

The hijacker cackled away—until his eyes suddenly sharpened behind his mask, and his voice turned solemn.

"By the way. Let me ask you the most important question."

"Wh-what?"

The captain's face was serious, and as the man spoke to him, his eyes were equally grave.

"You don't have an ultimate cook or a special forces member on this ship, do you? I don't want to run into any Seagals or Van Dammes."



In the Prochainezo cabin

I wonder where Firo went.

Ennis, back from the beauty treatment clinic, now had baby-soft skin, but the expression on her face was full of anxiety.

Czes isn't back, either.

The beauty treatment clinic had been a new experience for Ennis. As a homunculus, she'd never been all that interested in things like beauty and health, but she'd been curious as to whether the same beauty treatments that worked on humans would improve her skin, too.

She'd worried about what she would do if a professional beauty therapist picked up on some subtle anomaly in her skin elasticity and accused her of not being human. But all the therapists had actually said was, "You have such beautiful skin. Really, we're jealous." She'd spent a total of three hours undergoing beauty treatments.

She had no idea whether it had changed her internally or not, but either way, her skin was glowing now, and her hair seemed more elegant than before.

It doesn't look strange, does it?

Her skin didn't feel like usual, and Ennis had been meaning to ask Firo and Czes what they thought, but the room was empty when she got back.

Czes had told her, "I'm going to go explore the movie theater and places and stuff tonight, so don't worry if I don't come back," while Firo had said he was going to go check out the casino.

So Ennis had gone to look around the casino, but she hadn't seen Firo anywhere.

After returning to the room, she waited a little longer, but no word arrived from either of them.

I have to find them, she thought, and she'd just gotten to her feet when she heard a card key being swiped outside, and then the door opened.

When she saw Firo appear on the other side, Ennis gave a small sigh of relief. But then she noticed what seemed to be bullet holes in his clothes, and the sigh caught in her throat.

“Firo?! What happened?!”

“Oh, uh, don’t worry about it. I handled it. More or less.”

“What in the world...?”

“Ah, well, you know what my job is like, so I’m fairly used to this stuff, but...” Firo smiled awkwardly, then took his mangled, broken false glasses out of his jacket. “Aw, man... These were expensive.”

Physically, the head of their family didn’t have a scratch on him, but he looked exhausted as he slumped over.

“Once someone gets you wrong, it’s always so hard to set ’em straight...,” he murmured, plopping down heavily onto the sofa just as the room’s telephone rang.

Ennis hastily answered it, talked for a short while, and then—

“Um, Firo?”

“What?”

“It’s Czes... He says he’ll be spending the evening with an acquaintance, and he isn’t coming back to the room. He doesn’t want us to worry.”

“An acquaintance?” Firo thought for a while, wondering who that could be.

Had Claudia or Charon pinned him down? Or had he run into an old friend they didn’t know?

Czes had lived a long time, and it wouldn’t be odd for him to have one or two acquaintances on a ship like this one.

“Sheesh. He knows this is a family trip,” he muttered—and then he abruptly remembered what Czes had said to him as they were boarding.

“I’ll do my best not to disturb the two of you while we’re on the ship, and at night, I’ll hang out in the movie theater for you.”

Bwuff.

He didn’t have anything in his mouth, but Firo almost spat out his soul instead; his face was red, and he was breathing hard.

“What’s the matter?! Are you hurt after all?”

Worried, Ennis brought her face closer to his, but at the moment, that only made things worse.

His blush turned deeper and deeper, and Ennis looked more and more worried.

“Are you all right? Your face is bright red! Even immortals can temporarily run a fever from germs or poison, so you need to be careful...”

“N-no, it’s nothing like that!”

Firo shook his head emphatically, managing to take a few deep breaths.

Ennis looked mystified, but now that her husband’s color had returned to normal, she calmed down, too.

Taking another, longer look at Ennis, Firo commented on the effects of her visit to the clinic. “Hey, Ennis, you’re kinda shiny. Like on your face and your arms.”

“Huh?!” This time, it was Ennis’s turn to feel bewildered. She averted her eyes, as if she wasn’t sure what to do. “U-um... Is it...odd?”

“Course not. It’s pretty.”

He simply said what he felt.

He'd been through quite an ordeal a little while ago, but the mere sight of Ennis's soft hair and skin and her bashful expression was enough to soothe his soul.

"It...it is?"

Seeing Ennis's cheeks flush pale pink, Firo thought, *Oh, she's cute when she's embarrassed, too*. For him, it was enough. He decided the day had been a good one.

And so, to all appearances, the inexperienced husband and innocent wife's first night passed uneventfully.

They had no way of knowing what was quietly playing out beneath the surface.



Interlude

The next day—

“Hello? You jumped the gun, Misao. It’s only been twenty hours.”

“Yeah, uh, I’m sorry, Hiroko. I got a little worried.”

“What’s wrong? Homesick?”

“No... Uh, is anything strange happening over there?”

“Hmm? No, nothing’s happening. I slept very well, thank you.”

“I—I see... That’s good.”

“What’s the matter? You sound exhausted.”

“Well, uh... I don’t know how to put it... It’s, um, it’s just weird.”

“What’s weird?”

“The people on the ship I’m on are, like... I can’t exactly put my finger on why, but I feel like there are a lot of odd ones.”

“Like the masked character you were talking about yesterday?”

“Oh, no, not the guy in the mask... The other ones, the ordinary passengers. They’re strange.”

“How do you mean?”

“Like I said, it’s just a vague feeling. Sometimes I hear weird singing or praying, and a lot of their faces look sort of lifeless...”

“Are they all foreign?”

“Uh, yeah, foreign passengers, and I think a lot of the staff, too?”

“They just seem that way to you because you don’t see many foreigners, dear. I don’t think there’s anything to worry about.”

"I hope you're right, but... If anything happens over there, call me right away. Please."

"Honestly. You always have been a worrywart."

"Thanks. I feel a little better. Oh, but there is one other thing I thought was weird."

"What now?"

"Well... There's a whole bunch of 'em all wearing the same thing, these black-and-red coats."

"I wonder if they're Boy Scouts or something. It is odd that they'd be on a luxury cruise ship, though."

"You think so, too?"

"Maybe they're holding some sort of event? It sounds as though they'll be using our entire ship for a movie promotion. Come to think of it, that may have started already."

"You're not going to go watch?"

"You know I hate crowds."

"Now that you mention it, that's ri_____"

"Hello? Hello? Misao? Misao?"

"...Huh. Out of range? That's odd. This is supposed to be a satellite connection."

"Oh, honestly. A chill? ...Maybe I've caught Misao's nerves."

"...Did I just hear...?"

CHAPTER 3

ALL THE PASSENGERS DANCE IN A GARDEN OF BULLETS



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Voyage Day Two Evening, a semi-suite cabin

Czeslaw Meyer had spent the night in the private cabin of the pretty girl from the night before.

Out of context, it sounded racy—but as a matter of fact, he'd only been guarding the boys she'd caught and tied up, so it had been an exceedingly stressful night.

Czes had noticed her unusually skillful technique when she bound the boys and realized that he'd stepped on a serious land mine. Thinking he might as well be hanged for a sheep as a lamb, Czes had decided to see this through.

If this had happened in town, he could have just made a break for it, but in the enclosed environment of the ship, there was no telling when they'd run into each other again over the course of the voyage. And in that case, it would be better to get a good, thorough grasp of the situation.

I've had enough of being jerked around by things I don't understand.

With that in mind, Czes asked the girl directly. "Miss, who in the world are you?"

However, the girl just responded with a little snicker that managed to be simultaneously creepy and cute. "That's a secret. He'll yell at me otherwise!"

"Who will?"

“The president?”

“Of what?”

“Of my company!”

For a question that could expose her secrets, Illness’s answer was oddly confident.

When he tried to dig deeper, all she’d say was “Secret!” or “I dunno either!” so he stopped before they started going around in circles.

She’d caught three boys that time, which apparently left one more boy and a girl. That afternoon, Illness had said she’d go look for them, and she’d been scouring the ship ever since.

Czes was actually rather bored, but he couldn’t leave the captives unguarded.

Good grief. I can’t believe Ronny got me dragged into this.

At first, the three boys had planned to stay silent, but—

—suddenly, Illness had said, “I’m pretty sure I could manage some torture. The president said all I’d have to do was try the stuff they used to do to me!” Then, smiling, she’d hiked up her dress so they could see.

“Hey— ...Wh-what are you doing?!” Czes yelped, eyes wide as he stood behind her. The girl had bundled her skirt up almost to her chest.

However—

—the boys who were in front of her seemed to have seen something besides her underwear.

““Yaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaugh!””

The tall boy and the pudgy boy shuddered, turning pale. The short black boy’s expression was still composed, but he murmured to

himself, "...It looks as if it would be wiser to talk. If we're stubborn about keeping our secrets, Bobby and Carnea may end up in deep trouble."

And then he told them everything about why they were on the ship.

Come on, even these kids think they could handle us...?

The three boys were called Tall, Humpty, and Troy. They said they were part of a group led by Bobby Splot who made trouble on the Martillo Family's turf, but although they committed robbery, among various other crimes, they really were kids.

If Firo's baby face had convinced a pack of children that they stood a chance against him—children who knew that he was a gangster—then it was a force to be reckoned with, Czes thought while completely ignoring his own.

I probably shouldn't tell him about this.

Heaving a big sigh, Czes spoke to the boys lying on the floor in front of him. "Either way, it's all over for you. The crew may have caught Bobby and the other kid already."

"Sh-shut up, punk! You're pretty cocky for a shrimp!" the tall boy yelled at Czes, but with both hands and legs tied, he was less than convincing. His thumbs had also been tied together behind his back, making the bindings extra-hard to get out of.

"So what if I am? That's one of the privileges of being a little kid—you get to gloat when you take down someone bigger than you."

"Whoa, this brat is a pain in the ass!! He acts all grown up, *and* he's a big jerk!"

Tall was struggling and kicking, but Humpty seemed to have given up.

"Ngh... If Bobby hadn't jumped into this without a plan, this wouldn't have happened," he muttered.

"The minute Bobby said he was going to do something, I just gave up," added Troy. "On life."

So why are these kids sticking with Bobby, if that's what he's like?

He was genuinely curious about that, but Bobby's ancestor Jacuzzi had acted way more pathetic, and his popularity had been inversely proportionate. When you thought of it that way, a daredevil like Bobby attracting kids his own age might be more natural.

Once Czes had reached that point in his analysis, he decided to sit tight and wait for Illness to come back.

As it turned out, the people tailing them had had nothing to do with Illness, but she'd still volunteered to go look for Bobby, who had a distant connection to Czes, and the stowaway who had no connection to any of them at all. "No, it's fine," Illness had said. *"It looks like everything's going well, so I've got too much time on my hands now anyway!"*

"Still, I'm curious about that girl," Czes muttered to himself.

"Hey, so are we," remarked Tall.

"Th-that jerk Bobby," Humpty moaned. "He just abandoned us, grabbed her hand, and made a break for it."

"Of course he did. Back in our hiding place, she was pressed up against him, and I could tell she was secretly on his mind. Ever since that neighborhood streetwalker who likes 'em young messed around with him, he hasn't let any women get close, but it may be safe to assume that springtime's finally arrived for him. They make a good couple; they're both stowaways."

As Czes mulled over their replies, he decided to just say what he was thinking.

“...You’re Troy, right? Are you intentionally giving me blackmail material on Bobby?”

“Perish the thought. I simply decided that for the sake of our futures, it was about time that Bobby, the planless wonder, learned some life lessons. I bet he rushed it when we tailed you yesterday because he wanted to show off in front of the girl, too.”

“I—I see...”

“He pretends he isn’t interested, but it’s glaringly obvious. After all, Carnea has the same golden tan as the girls in the pictures he used to cut out of girlie mags.”

Czes was beginning to wonder whether this kid actually had any loyalty to his leader at all. He decided to wait quietly for Illness to return.

Come to think of it, I ended up leaving Ennis and Firo alone together almost right after we got here yesterday. I hope they manage to get even a little closer, for my own peace of mind, too.

Czes sometimes worried that his living with them might be keeping their relationship from developing. Praying they would make some progress, he smirked and turned on the TV.



The shipboard shopping mall

“Man, we slept like a couple’a logs last night, huh, Ennis?”

“We certainly did. I was concerned about falling asleep in an unfamiliar environment, but the quality of the bed and the pillow made it so easy.”

As they sat on a bench and did some people watching, Firo and Ennis were conversing quietly.

If Czes had heard what they were talking about, he would have been visibly disappointed, but he probably wouldn't be able to say anything after seeing how happy they looked.

They were currently in front of the fountain on the lowest level of the cylindrical shopping mall atrium. A fountain inside a ship was an incredibly surreal sight, but if you ignored the rocking of the ship, the place looked just like an ordinary shopping mall on land.

The two of them were reading the signs on the various stores, when—

"Sorry. Did I keep you waiting?"

"No, we just got here." Firo stood up, smiling thinly at the man in black who'd appeared in front of them. "Let me introduce you. This is my wife, Ennis. Ennis, this is Angelo, the guy I told you about last night."

After Firo made the introductions, the two new acquaintances traded pleasantries.

"Um, it's good to meet you..."

"I must say, you have a beautiful wife, Firo. I'm jealous; I'd almost trade you for mine... Hey, don't look so upset. I won't take her. Although I really am jealous."

"Oh, no, please don't flatter me like that."

"No, no, I'm sorry for putting all those holes in your husband's clothes yesterday."

The tone of the conversation was friendly, but its content was less pleasant.

"You can say that again," Firo commented. "I don't know how many years it's been since the last time I got shot."

"Well, I wasted some perfectly good bullets. That makes us even."

“...You’re full of crap, you know that?” Firo smirked, but Angelo’s smile didn’t go past his lips; his eyes were sharp.

“Still, are you sure about this?” he asked. “I’d rather not drag your wife into this mess...”

“Hey, I won’t put Ennis in danger. She’s just checking the areas only women can go into. That group has girls, too, right? Besides...we don’t feel great about having a group like that one on the ship, either. Especially when we don’t know what they’re after.”

“Well, yeah, but...”

As Angelo hesitated, Firo said what he needed to and set the other man at ease.

“Plus, we’re only helping you with the search. If a gunfight breaks out afterward, you’re on your own. I don’t have the authority to start anything with another organization without permission.”

“I know that. And you’ve got your family to take care of.”

Nodding in agreement, Firo went on. “Although if they start saying they’re going to scuttle this ship, I’ll have to jump in.”

“I’ll tell our demolition guy to be careful not to sink the boat.”

Keeping their banter short, Firo and Angelo began more seriously discussing what they were about to do.

Watching the two of them converse, Ennis thought for a while.

What on earth had happened yesterday? She hadn’t been told any of the details.

She hadn’t asked, either.

All she’d heard was that Firo had been mistaken for a Mask Maker, and this man had pulled a gun on him. He hadn’t told her about what had happened after that. From the holes in his clothes, she could tell he’d been shot at least four times.

He hadn't given her any specifics about the shooting, though, nor how he'd cleared up the misunderstanding.

He'd said only that he had managed to smooth everything over and that the other party had found out he was immortal.

And then he'd begged her, "*It's just, now that I know the story, I gotta help*, so... I'm really sorry! Tomorrow, just for a day, would you mind if I gave him a hand?!" And that was it.

However, to Ennis, that was enough reason to help.

Firo tried to act cool, as befitted a Camorra executive, but he actually tended to let his emotions fuel his actions quite often. Of course she wasn't happy about her husband getting shot, but since he'd smiled and forgiven the man, there was nothing for her to say, and without full context, she couldn't get angry about anything specific, either.

Really, Firo always tries to carry too much by himself.

She'd known that about him ever since 1934, when she'd learned he'd been sent to Alcatraz in order to get a crime she'd committed struck from the books—even before then, in fact, when she saw his furious reaction after she'd told him what Szilard used to do to her.

And that was why these things didn't make her angry—at the very least, Ennis just wanted to live with him as long as she could, so she could help him carry those burdens. For her, helping him was a source of joy.

She'd come here to help him today as well, but while Firo talked with Angelo, Ennis watched his profile and thought.

Firo was really very good at getting people to do what he wanted without telling them the important things. Actually, to be precise, he was good at making them want to help him. She didn't know whether it was deliberate or just the way he was, but she thought that over the past seventy years, Firo had refined that ability to an

extraordinary degree. A fitting skill for an underworld executive, perhaps.

However—no matter the reason, whether he needed her right now or whether he didn't and simply stayed by her side anyway—she loved Firo. She'd talked with Czes about that feeling just once, but he'd laughed at her. "Geez, is that all? Firo thinks the exact same thing. Maybe you don't see it yourselves, but you two are peas in a pod."

I wonder if he was right?

In order to make sure, Ennis thought back to when Firo had told her, "Let's get married..."

"What's wrong, Ennis? Your face is bright red. You aren't running a fever, are you?!"

...and ended up making him worry about her, in a reversal of the day before.



In the ship's dedicated event storeroom

"O-okay. We should be able to hide here for a while."

As they walked among the equipment for various events in the dim storeroom, Bobby sighed in relief, squeezing Carnea's hand tightly with his right hand.

"Ow!"

"Oh, s-sorry!" Hastily letting go, Bobby showed clear panic on his face.

“No, I’m all right. I’m sorry; that was loud, wasn’t it...?” Carnea apologized in a small voice, and Bobby could feel himself starting to blush.

However, blustering to himself that letting a girl get under his skin in a situation like this was seriously low, he shoved down his feelings and replied impassively.

“Be careful, wouldja? Just don’t hold me back, got it?”

“I—I know.” Carnea sounded ashamed, and Bobby mentally called himself a moron twenty-three times.

They’d been running around the ship in fits and starts, almost without a break, and now they were so tired even walking was tough.

After making sure they were finally completely alone, Bobby and Carnea went around behind a big set of some sort and sat down.

“I hope...*those guys* won’t chase us, too...if we’re here.” Bobby heaved a big sigh.

Carnea also exhaled, nodding. However, her breath sounded a little shaky, suggesting she was frightened.

The fear and anxiety they felt wasn’t inspired by the eerie girl Illness. It wasn’t because the crew might catch them and hand them over to the police, either.

At the moment—

—they were being pursued not by Illness or the crew members but by a third party.



A few hours earlier

“Okay, okay, okay, we should be able to hide here for a while.”

Having successfully evaded both Illness and the crew, Bobby and Carnea had slipped into a linen closet that had an OUT OF ORDER sign on it. Although a malfunction on a luxury cruise ship seemed pretty pathetic, the two of them were just grateful to find a space people weren’t likely to visit.

However, they couldn’t hide in there forever.

When they looked around, trying to see if there was any way to conceal themselves more thoroughly, Bobby spotted a small grill up near the ceiling. If they could just get that grill off, the vent behind it might be big enough for a person to fit through.

It was probably a maintenance door, a way for technicians to get inside the system if there was trouble with the ventilation.

“Which means...” He checked again, and sure enough, there was a ladder lying conveniently in a corner of the room. “Jackpot!”

The stowaway thanked God for his incredibly good fortune and snatched up the ladder, elated that he’d found an absolutely safe place where he and the girl could hide.

That is, until they’d traveled a little ways down the ventilation shaft, which was even roomier than they’d thought—

... and they stumbled onto an odd machine with blinking red LEDs.



The bridge

“Huh?”

“What’s the matter?”

The first man was watching a video feed of some sort on a laptop, and the question had come from the man beside him.

“Well, uh... Somebody just bumped into one of the gizmos Life set up.”

“...Hang on a second.”

One of the Mask Maker hijackers took a two-way radio from his belt and called a specific frequency. “Hey, Life. Life, do you read me?”

“What is it?”

“Where are you right now?”

“In the hub of the ventilation shaft system. Block Three,” Life answered.

“So you’re not in front of Number Fifty-Three?” the man asked, his voice grave.

“It isn’t far, but I’m not right next to it. Is something the matter?”

“I think...we might have a rat over there.”

“...Understood. Let us hope that a rat really is nibbling on the cord.

“I’ll go right over and take a look.”



In the ventilation shaft

“? The heck is this thing?”

After crawling along for a while, Bobby discovered a peculiar machine.

“What’s the matter?” Carnea asked from behind him.

“There’s this weird thingy here,” Bobby answered tersely. He cautiously touched the device. They couldn’t afford to just crawl over it and set off an alarm or something.

He examined the device carefully, but the longer he looked at it, the less he understood it. It didn’t have wires connecting it to anything, and it seemed to be operating in isolation. It didn’t even have a power cord, so it might not be intended for permanent use.

There was a small plastic bottle attached to it, with some kind of liquid rippling inside.

“Bobby? What’s wrong? Did you find something?”

“Uh...”

Bobby had been staring and poking at the object for a while now, so he racked his brain and finally came up with an answer.

“I bet it makes a smell to chase rats away!”

And then—

“You are the rats.”

—a muffled voice echoed from the darkness ahead of Bobby.

“Waugh?!” “Eep?!”

Behind him, Carnea seemed to have detected the presence in the darkness, too, and she shrieked, backing up.

The faint red light from the machine revealed a man whose face was hidden by night vision goggles and a mask. From what Bobby had learned from movies and manga, he was perfectly dressed for a cramped space like this.

However, he didn’t have time to process any of that.

“What naughty children. I’ll have to punish you.”

Hastily, Bobby tried to back up, but before he could, the man in the night vision goggles reached out.

“Bobby!” Carnea cried behind him, and Bobby shoved the machine at the man, stubbornly refusing to go down without a fight.

“Whoa!”

The man in the night vision goggles caught and steadied the device with both hands, careful not to let the attached bottle come loose.

While he was occupied, Bobby beat a rapid retreat back into the linen cupboard.

The children had gotten away, but first Life made sure that the device was safe. Then, with a deep breath, he headed for the exit the boy and girl had used.

Flipping a switch on his night vision goggles, he cut over to the normal camera just in time to see the boy sprinting out of the linen cupboard, pulling a tanned Caucasian girl by the hand.

For a short while, Life stayed where he was, pondering something.

“Well, now. Are they heroes worth worrying about, or are they simply victims?” he muttered, then took out his radio.

“It’s me. The rats were two children... And I’m sorry. They got away.”

“Why you— You think ‘They got away’ is gonna cut it?!”

“...I’m not certain the rats will report this to a security guard.”

“What?”

Life calmly informed his dubious listener of the conclusion he’d reached. “They were creeping around the vents, after all. I believe they’re stowaways.”

“.....”

“I think we should *dispose of* them before they decide being arrested is worth it and start making a fuss.”

“Describe them.”

“A boy with short hair, about fourteen or fifteen, and a girl around the same age or perhaps a little younger... She’s white, with pretty blond hair and an equally pretty tan. I recommend searching for a pair consisting of a tanned blond girl and an ordinary boy.”

As a result, the two easily identifiable stowaways were soon common knowledge to every Mask Maker on the ship.



And now, back to the present, in the event storeroom.

As he got his breathing under control, Bobby thought back over the past few hours.

Ever since they’d run into the spy-looking guy in the ventilation shaft, their situation had taken a major turn for the worse.

They’d been doggedly pursued not by the girl in the Gothic dress, nor by crew members who’d realized they were stowaways—but by dangerous-seeming men dressed like ordinary passengers.

He’d been keeping a wary eye out for the man in the night vision goggles in case he tried to come after them, when he spotted men heading straight for them.

At times like this, Bobby’s experience with running from the police in New York came in handy. After so many crimes over the years, he’d learned to pick out policemen, plainclothes police, or men pursuing him with the intent of reclaiming stolen property after just a glance around, even in the middle of a Broadway crowd.

It wasn't a praiseworthy skill, but it worked miraculously well for him here.

As they beat a hasty retreat, several other passengers began to chase them.

It was like they'd turned all the passengers on the boat against them.

If the crew caught them as stowaways, they'd only get turned over to the police. He didn't know what would happen if that Gothic girl caught them, but he got the feeling she wouldn't actually kill them.

But these people were dangerous.

The experience Bobby had acquired over the course of his short life combined with his instincts to sound a blaring alarm.

If those guys catch us, we're probably gonna die.

Carnea seemed to have the same hunch, and the moment they were in a deserted area, she looked truly relieved as she panted for breath, shoulders heaving.

"We've gone far enough; we can relax here, at least for a bit."

"I—I think you're right... Eek?!" Carnea shrieked a little as she looked up, and Bobby stiffened.

On reflex, he followed Carnea's gaze and saw—
—an enormous lower jaw.

It belonged to a great white shark more than thirty feet long—or rather, an animatronic made to look like one.

"Th-that scared me..."

"I-is that the robot shark that was up on deck?!"

On closer inspection, he saw that the special suit worn by the Gear, protagonist of the *Mode Gears* series, was beside the shark. It was

made of metal and covered in gears, but apparently it was possible to put it on just like an ordinary creature suit.

There were lots of other *Mode Gears*—related props and sets nearby, and although they hadn't noticed when they sat down, this seemed to be the designated prop storage area for the movie event.

"It was outside until yesterday... Why is it here?"

Bobby's question had been directed at Carnea, but—

"...For the event at the fountain soon," someone replied briefly.

Both stowaways froze up again. When they looked in the direction of the voice, they saw a boy with golden, coldly gleaming eyes.

"Wh—who are you?"

The boy didn't seem to be one of their pursuers, but despite his feminine appearance, he was strangely intimidating as he spoke to Bobby and Carnea.

"...This room is...staff only..." His voice was low, but his intent was clear.

He's going to own us.

Before he could be overwhelmed any further, Bobby did what he always did in town: He pulled a jackknife out of his hip pocket and flipped it open with a loud *click*.

"B-Bobby..."

He heard a mixture of fear and reproach in Carnea's voice, but he couldn't back down now.

"Settle down. It's fine; as long as he doesn't get noisy, I won't do nothin'."

He wasn't used to making threats. Ordinarily, when he snatched things from tourists, he just yelled something random to confuse

them, then grabbed whatever they had. He didn't have much experience with negotiations.

It wasn't clear what the boy thought of him, but he walked up to Bobby with no hesitation.

"E-easy, keep quiet..." Flustered, Bobby gave an upward thrust with the knife as a threat.

"...You're the one...who needs to be quiet," the boy muttered. He clenched his fists, crossed his forearms, passed them over the knife, then swept them downward.

"Huh?!"

Bobby's knife hand was stopped by the other boy's crossed wrists.

The blade swept through the space the boy had intentionally left open between his hands and torso, then stopped moving completely.

Then, in one fluid motion, the mysterious boy grabbed and pulled Bobby's wrist toward himself, simultaneously circling around behind him and switching places with him.

"Wha—?"

If I fight him, he'll break it.

Before his rational brain registered this, his opponent had disappeared behind him, pulling his own right hand with him—and the next thing he knew, his arm was twisted behind himself.

"...Ah! ...Gah-ghk!"

It's gonna hurt.

Bobby's nerves made the decision for him and abruptly relaxed his hand, letting the knife drop.

Wordlessly, the boy caught the weapon by its hilt, folded it as though nothing had happened, and slipped it into his own pocket.

“Ah, aaah...”

When his arm was released, Bobby sat down hard, and something inside him audibly broke.

That's it. We're toast.

He still didn't know whether his opponent was an enemy or an ally, but if he'd been alone, he definitely would have said the words out loud.



But right now, Carnea was there with him. Somehow, he had to come up with a way to get out of this.

And as Bobby racked his brains, Fate sneered at his efforts and sent him more trials.

“Hey, I bet it’s this storeroom.”

“Man, it’s big... They weren’t in the one over there, though, so... You circle around that way!”

From the depths of the storeroom, they heard voices that seemed to be hunting for them.

There were plenty of shelves and objects to obscure their view, but they were definitely coming closer.

“C-Carnea, you run for it, at least!” Bobby screamed at Carnea in a whisper.

“I—I can’t. If they catch you, they’ll kill you!” Carnea whispered back at him. It was the unpleasant truth.

Eyes still cold, the boy with Bobby’s knife listened to their conversation and the voices from elsewhere in the storeroom.

Then, slowly, he took a step forward—

—grabbed Bobby’s and Carnea’s arms, and yanked them toward him.

“Were they there?”

“No, not over h... Huh? Hey! Hey, you! Kid!” Spotting a small figure up ahead in the storeroom, one of the Mask Makers yelled. “Turn around right... Wha...?”

Then, seeing the boy’s face in the dim light, the man made a noise that was almost a shriek.

“Ch-Charon! Holy shit, it’s Charon Walken!”

“Whaaat?! Are you kidding me?!”

As they recognized the world-famous young stuntman, the two pursuers forgot their job for a moment. Their voices were trembling.

“Whooooa, no way! I’m a huge fan! Seriously, it’s an honor to meet you.”

“.....”

“Wow, you really do look like your photos!”

As the tension suddenly drained from the atmosphere around him—

“.....”

Bobby trembled in a cold sweat, still as tense as ever.

He was standing right beside his pursuers, completely still...

And all he could do, there inside the Gear’s suit, was shiver with despair written across his face.

A moment ago, when Charon had grabbed Bobby’s and Carnea’s arms, he’d quickly lifted Carnea and popped her into the shark’s mouth as if she weighed nothing. Then he’d put Bobby into the Gear’s suit nearby.

The shark’s mouth was unexpectedly spacious inside (as a matter of fact, during filming, they’d shot a scene where the Gear was swallowed whole), and if Carnea was alone, there was more than enough room for her to hide.

Meanwhile, although he’d tried to get Bobby completely into the suit, they hadn’t had that kind of time. Only his top half had been transformed into a gear monster, while his lower half was still wearing jeans, and there he stood, a bizarre-looking hybrid.

The storeroom was gloomy, but if they looked at him closely, they were bound to notice. He was on edge, convinced that staying like this wasn't safe, but—

"H-hey, I hate to say this, but we've gotta go."

"Oh, yeah, you're right. Hey, Charon. You didn't see two kids come through here, did you?"

Charon nodded, then pointed to a different door from the one the men had come in by.

"Over there, huh?! Dammit, they just cut through?!"

"Thanks, guy. They lifted our wallets, see."

With that, the pair began to make a rapid exit, but then—

—one of the men stopped in his tracks and turned back to them.

"Whoops. That was close. I must be a complete idiot."

He knows! I'm dead!

At the sound of the man's voice, Bobby's heart froze over, but...

"I have a notebook and pen on me. Could I get your autograph?"

As he spoke, the man took out a notebook, and Bobby just barely managed not to fall to his knees.

"Hey, lucky! Dammit! Oh, then could you sign *this* for me?"

"Whoa. That's not really, uh..."

"Aw, who cares! Yesssss! Now I'll be able to brag about this later!"

After the men wrapped up their conversation and left the storeroom, Bobby exhaled heavily, then finally collapsed to his knees. "Th-th-thanks. You saved our butts."

Charon cocked his head. "...Pickpocket?"

“No! Believe me, I didn’t do any of that *today!*”

“.....” Charon just nodded. His silence was unsettling, but the boy had saved them, so Bobby thanked him honestly.

“Sorry about that... And after I pulled a knife on you and everything.”

Bobby sounded uneasy, but Charon shook his head.

“...I’ll go...look outside,” he said, then headed for the door the men had left through.

As he watched him go, Bobby began to take big, deep breaths inside the Gear’s mask. At the same time, he looked at the shark and saw a tiny sliver of Carnea’s face peeking out.

“D-did he save us?”

“Yeah... What do we do now, though?” he murmured, troubled. He was even starting to consider turning himself in to the crew.

But there was no guarantee that those men weren’t connected to the crew themselves. Plus, even in an ideal case where they believed the story about the machine in the ventilation shaft right away, the device might be gone by now.

“What should we do...?”

Picking up the lower half of the Gear’s costume, which he hadn’t been able to get into earlier, Bobby looked down, at a loss. For now, just in case the other guys came back before Charon did, he started to pull on the costume to complete his transformation, but—

—just before he finished changing, all the lights in the storeroom flashed on, the big cargo door opened, and a whole crowd of people surged in.

“Eeep...”

Caught in the middle of putting on the final part, the right boot, Bobby was briefly paralyzed but—

Spotting Bobby, the man at the center of the group raised his voice.

“Maaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaarvelous!” he cried with gusto.

What the heck?!

Bobby’s nerves were screaming. Every time he thought it was over, it just got worse. His heart couldn’t take much more of this.

“You didn’t come back, so we came to get you! Just look at you! Already gearing up! You really are the Gear incarnate, the son of the cog! And yet, you won’t become a cog in the wheel of society. Who are you? That’s right; you’re Charon Walken, the one and only! This is great! Really perfect!”

Following the large black man, people who seemed to be movie staff flooded into the storeroom and began to move the shark robot with Carnea still inside it.

Aaaah!

He wanted to stop them, but if he said anything, he’d out himself for sure.

Blissfully unaware of his panic, the man who seemed to be in charge thumped the gear monster’s shoulder, his mood still sky-high.

“All right, let’s go! Claudia’s already warming up the audience for us, so just do your thing and you’ll be a sensation!” It was a little ridiculous to have the leading lady warm up a venue, but the director didn’t seem to care. He tugged at the Gear’s hand, which had Bobby’s hand inside it.

Unable to protest or deny anything, Bobby was simply swept up in the current and out of the storeroom.

He didn’t even have time to imagine what might be waiting out there...



Shopping mall, lowest floor The café in front of the fountain

Just a few yards away from the fountain, a mixed group of three was drinking coffee at a table on a café terrace inside the ship.

“There’s something weird about having an outdoor café this deep inside a ship.”

“Malls often have indoor café terraces, though.”

“Once this job is over, let’s go out to the prow and drink something harder.”

“If we did that, getting drunk would be the least of our problems. We might just fall into the ocean.”

As they chatted, Firo and the others had been discussing where they should search next for the Mask Makers and what to look for, but— Suddenly, they realized their surroundings were getting noisy.

“What’s up?”

They turned toward the sound and heard a girl’s familiar, cheerful voice from the other side of the fountain.

“Hey, is that Claudia?”

“Come to think of it...I heard they were planning to hold a promotional event for the movie on the event stage by the fountain today.”

“Huh... She’s out this close to the audience? That sounds like her, all right.”

“She’s always enjoyed this sort of thing, even before she made her debut.”

“Yeah, those kids don’t even have an agent. They take all their movies offers directly.”

Angelo noticed Firo and Ennis smiling as they discussed the young star. Intrigued, he asked, “What, are you friends with Claudia Walken?”

“We know their family. Couldn’t get rid of ’em if we wanted to.”

“I see... I’m jealous. Of her movies, I like *The Wild Dog in the Wind*.”

He gave an unusually gentle smile—and then, without changing that expression, quickly ran his eyes around the area.

“Hey, what’s wrong?”

“Nothing. I just thought they might be here to watch the event.”

“I seriously doubt they’d show themselves in front of a crowd like this,” Firo said with a little smile, but Angelo was completely serious. Still, he didn’t seem to think it was too likely, either.

“It’s just that they sounded like movie buffs. If they really are taking this voyage to let the situation cool off, they may be relaxed enough to come watch this.”

“Gotcha.”

Satisfied by the explanation, Firo let his eyes wander around the mall. He didn’t have any details to help him identify the Mask Maker members, so for now, he was just looking for underworld types.

As someone who’d been an executive for seventy years, he could more or less tell by instinct whether the people around were on the level or not. Naturally, plenty of people could skillfully hide it, but from what he’d heard from Angelo, this group didn’t fall into that category.

I thought I was pretty good at hiding, too, but I guess not.

After Angelo had read him like a book the previous day, Firo was determined to prove himself again and ferret out these underworld businessmen.

For a little while, the three of them monitored the situation around the event.

Then an especially loud cheer went up, and from the corridor that connected the shopping mall with the shipboard storerooms, an enormous shark appeared.

“Whoa. They brought that shark robot inside?”

As the shark twisted and writhed like the real thing, a grotesque, gear-covered hero was standing next to it and waving both hands enthusiastically in response to the cheers.

“Hey, Charon’s really into this.”

“He seems a little more awkward than usual, doesn’t he?”

“Eh, he’s probably just nervous. I bet this is his first time at an event like this.”

Ennis had noticed that something was odd, but Firo just watched the gear monster with a warm smile.

“Reminds you that he’s human, too, y’know? It’s kind of a relief.”



Outside, at the top of the ship By the pool

At the outdoor pool, affluent men and women were lounging around in swimsuits.

In the twilight, as people enjoyed the luxury of swimming in fresh water amid an ocean of salt water, a girl in a striking yellow-and-black Gothic dress wove her way through the crowd.

“They’re not here, huh? They’re really not here.”

She'd clearly been looking in the wrong places. Even after searching for half a day, she still hadn't found the stowaways, nor had she run into her fellow Mask Makers who were pursuing them.

According to their plan, the seajack should have been under way by now, but no one had contacted her, and the ship's passengers seemed to be happily enjoying their voyage.

"Everything must be going well. Good, that's good. I'm so happy for them."

Illness had been wandering around out on deck, talking to herself, but then—

—glancing at the poolside clock, she remembered something.

"Oh, right! Claudia's event is starting!"

Instantly, her thoughts switched over from stowaways to Claudia, and she quickly trotted away from the poolside with a strange little gait, not sparing a glance for anything else.



In front of the fountain, onstage

What do I do?

Shut inside the world's tightest hiding place, Bobby waved his hands to move his prison around. He was bathed in cold sweat, and the unusually high humidity was wearing his spirit down even further.

In the end, the stowaway hadn't been able to escape, and the staff had escorted him into the venue. Right beside him, the shark was wagging its fin and working its jaws. To the best of his knowledge, Carnea was still inside. He was worried she might get caught in its

internal motor and injured, but at the moment, there was nothing he could do.

From inside the suit, he looked out at the surrounding crowd.

Hundreds of eyes were focused on them, not just from in front of the stage where they were standing but from every floor of the enormous shopping mall around the fountain.

Had he ever been the center of this much attention in his life? Certainly not before now and probably never again.

This was the biggest moment of his life, and he was living it as somebody else.

Still, right now, he had other, better things to worry about.

I-I'm so confused, but it looks like I don't have to talk. His mind had gone blank, but he worked it as hard as he could as he groped for a way to get through this. *Well, if I just wave a bit and nod...*, he thought, looking around again, and then—

—he spotted several of the men who'd been chasing the two of them just moments ago in the audience, and his mind nearly went blank again.

Why are those thugs at an event like this?!

He very nearly yelped in protest, but there wasn't a thing he could do about it.

He was terrified that the large director or the girl talking next to him would tell him, *Okay, take off the mask now.*

But time kept ticking by, and nothing happened. Bobby was beginning to wonder if he was going to be on display permanently.

Maybe this was actually a dream.

Maybe he was still in the lifeboat, asleep. Maybe the pressure from the gear suit was really Humpty or Tall leaning on him. He was very close to believing it, too, but then Carnea would have been a dream.

No, let Carnea stay. Let the rest of it be a dream, though.

Hey, it might a dream I'm having after Carnea crawled in with us—

The moment he started hoping for this, although even he knew it was a stretch, the girl onstage with him forcibly yanked him back to reality.

"So... You're not Charon, are you?"

"...!"

They were posing for pictures, and the girl, who seemed to be about his age, had gone behind him and twined her arms around his neck. She'd set down her mic and rested her face right by his ear, so only Bobby could hear her quiet murmur.

"For goodness' sake. It's completely obvious to me. I get the feeling the director's noticed it, too, but he's keeping the cameras rolling in case it turns into something interesting."

"...Uh..."

"I wonder what he'd do if you were an assassin here to kill me or a deranged fan... Still, I really doubt Charon would let assassins and fans steal his clothes, so I'm guessing there's something else going on." Giggling, the girl directed a fearless smile at this mysterious individual. "Fine. You're in luck; I'll keep quiet about it for now."

"Huh...?"

Bobby almost turned to look at the girl in spite of himself, but she checked him in a whisper: "Don't move." Then the star on the stage gave an order to the boy in the suit.

She wore the confident, genuine smile of a girl who ruled the world itself.

“I only ask for one thing. As long as you’re wearing that suit—make sure you act like a real hero from start to finish, all right?”



“Ha-ha-ha! Charon’s pretty tense up there, isn’t he?”

The Gear really was acting a little awkward. Firo smiled, apparently amused.

Beside him, Angelo was wearing a similar expression, but he was still casing the area. “...Bingo,” he finally murmured, so low only Firo and Ennis could hear. “Found ’em.”

“Seriously?”

Keeping their expressions as natural as possible, Firo and Ennis quietly switched mental gears.

Angelo nodded softly. “Stay calm and listen.”

Quietly darting his eyes toward the targets, he told them:

“...They’re the group who just sat down next to us.”

“Ahh, dammit. We can only see their backs from here.”

“Kevin and Baum sure are lucky bastards. They waltzed in and got Charon Walken’s autograph.”

“Still, it doesn’t look like we’ll be able to get around the front of the stage at this point. Want to go to a higher floor?”

“That’s an idea. Argh... Damn those stowaway brats.”

Two of the Mask Makers who’d attacked the restaurant the other day were muttering to each other, their eyes fixed on the stage.

Angelo and company watched them from behind. It sounded as though the two might head upstairs, and after a whispered conference, they decided to follow them if that happened.

(“And I’ll take over from here. I don’t mind if you want to bow out now.”)

(“Well, let us see it through, at least.”)

As they talked, Firo was feeling relieved. This was looking a lot less complicated than he’d anticipated. He leaned back in his chair, ready to see what Angelo could do, when—

—a shriek echoed across the café terrace, breaking through all the excitement.

“Aaaaaaaaaaaaaah!”

It sounded like it belonged to a young girl, and it had come from right beside Firo.

“You! You’re that really cool gunman from earlier! It is you, right? C’mon, tell me! I’m right, aren’t I?!”

Firo and the others hastily turned and saw the girl in the yellow-and-black Gothic dress from yesterday, eyes round, pointing at Angelo.

“Wow, what an incredible coincidence! ...Oh!” she shouted again, apparently startled. “Hey, wait, are you here to kill everybody?”

She was holding a cup of cocoa, probably purchased at the café. After all, this café was the quickest place to get something to eat or drink during the event.

There were several other shops, but the girl had gotten here so late that this café on the wrong side of the stage had been her only viable option.

Firo and the others had no way of knowing this, however; they were just bewildered by the abrupt intruder. And then, coming to themselves with a jolt, they whipped around to look the other way.

The Mask Makers were already drawing their guns.

Angelo was reaching into his jacket, too. With his quick draw, he could probably nail the two of them, but not before they got off shots of their own. By the time Firo had consciously realized this, he had already knocked over his chair and lunged forward.

Shots rang out.

Even as Firo passed in front of him, Angelo accurately plugged both of his enemies in their shoulders.

The bullets tore through their flesh and right out the other side, embedding themselves in the wall of the ship.

Meanwhile, the small-caliber bullets from the Mask Makers had been headed for Angelo's skull, but at the last second, Firo had put himself between them, and the shots pierced his shoulder without punching all the way through.



“Firo!”

Ennis was the first to respond. She leaped to her feet, kicking up the table they’d been sitting at; then without lowering her leg again, she slammed the airborne piece of furniture at the two enemies.

The table mowed the pair down.

That was when the passengers finally realized the sounds had been gunshots and started screaming.

Instantly, everyone around the fountain descended into panic, and the bodyguards on the movie staff evacuated Claudia, the director, and the Gear into a maintenance corridor.

As he watched Claudia make her escape unharmed, Firo breathed a sigh of relief, then began thinking about what to do.

I could tell the security guards that those two suddenly fired at me...then pretend I don’t know Angelo, I guess? Is that the only alternative? He looked around to see whether there were any crew members or security personnel nearby—and instead, he spotted a passenger who was glaring at them, traveling against the flow of the fleeing crowd.

He was obviously a criminal type, and his hand was already reaching into his suit jacket.

“You’ve gotta be kidding me.” As the regeneration gradually dulled the fierce pain radiating from his shoulder into the rest of his body, Firo grabbed Ennis and dived into the café.

Angelo tumbled in right on their heels.

A moment later, gunshots rang out, and the café’s windows shattered with a loud *crash*.

“Dammit! Aaaaaaaaah! He shot me! Dammit to hell!”

Meanwhile, the men who'd been hit by the table were clutching their wounded shoulders and rolling around on the floor.

"Are you okay?" Illness didn't sound particularly concerned.

The sight of her seemed to infuriate the men, and their pain turned into anger that they vented on her.

"Shaddup! Just get outta here!"

"Shoulda called you *Plague*, since that's what you are!"

Even though they were in the middle of a firefight, Illness puffed out her cheeks and pouted at this injustice. "I am not! If I hadn't screamed, that gunslinger would have turned you into Swiss cheese for sure! Besides, I can help in a gunfight!" She didn't seem to be taking this as seriously as she should, and the increasingly annoyed men yelled at her.

"Shove it! What can you do? You're unarmed!"

"You're useless without a weapon, so go get your equipment, then get your ass over here and back us up!"

As they shouted at her, an odd expression rose to Illness's face. It was hard to tell whether she was about to fly into a rage or burst into tears.

"Who cares about you?!" she screamed, then ran off like a little child.

She melted into the crowd stampeding away from the gunshots and immediately vanished.

Then, as if to replace her, several Mask Makers filtered out of the flood of passengers and into the mall, and suddenly the fight was on.



The bridge

“Hey, what’s going on?” asked the masked man gravely. He could tell the call from his comrade was urgent.

As he listened to the report, his face grew paler and paler beneath his mask.

“...You’re telling me that gunslinger is on this ship?”

Even worse, the gunfight was already in progress. Clicking his tongue in irritation, he issued matter-of-fact instructions to his subordinate.

“Keep him pinned down for a while. I’ll contact the communications room and have them intercept any SOSs from the passengers. In the meantime—”

“—I’m sending Life over to you right now.”



“Sorry. Guess I dragged you into a gunfight after all.”

“Don’t worry about it. It’s not your fault.”

In the midst of the gunshots and screams, Firo and the others hid in the café, monitoring the situation in the mall. The customers and café staff had already escaped out the back door, so Firo, Angelo, and Ennis were the only people inside. Angelo was the only one with a gun; Firo and Ennis were completely unarmed.

“Is your shoulder all right?”

“Like hell it is. How many suits am I going to have to wreck on this trip?” Firo grinned wryly, and Angelo returned the smile with some relief.

“Sorry about that,” he said, then stuck his arm and face out from the cover of the wall and fired off several shots.

From out in the mall, they heard a groan. One down, it sounded like.

“Did you kill him?”

“No. I shot his arm. If he doesn’t stop the bleeding soon, though, he might die.”

“You got his *arm*? You say that like it’s nothing.”

Under the circumstances, aiming at an opponent’s arm with a handgun was insane, and being able to actually hit it required extraordinary abilities.

“I can’t have them dying too easily,” Angelo replied matter-of-factly.

Firo shook his head wearily. “I’d love to hire you as our bodyguard,” he muttered, and he meant every word.

“Sorry. As I said yesterday, I’ve pledged loyalty to my current boss.”

“Yeah, I know. I just meant— Well, frankly, I’m jealous of your boss.”

A few minutes later—

“Dammit, how many of them are there?”

—bullets flew toward them from every corner of the mall, and Firo gulped quietly.

Angelo’s bullets had already incapacitated several enemies or even killed them, but they were still popping up one after another.

Even so, Angelo was coolly whittling down their numbers.

It seemed as if it was going to be a simple matter of which was greater, the number of enemies or Angelo’s stock of bullets, but then—

—a roar thundered through the mall, shattering the moment of calm.

Angelo stuck his head out to see what was up, and the next instant, whatever he'd seen sent him diving back behind the counter.

A moment later, a violent *budda, budda, budda* echoed around them—

And the flooring near the café's entrance started sending chips flying in every direction.

Firo peered cautiously out the window. "...Whoa, c'mon. Handguns are one thing, but how'd they get one of *those* on board?"

Four levels up from the ground floor where they were, someone was standing in front of a high-class boutique with an assault rifle.

Whoever it was had attacked them, so it was safe to assume this was one of the Mask Makers, but this one looked nothing like the rest of them. They were dressed in a full-body black combat suit and a full-face silicone mask, with mechanical goggles on top of that.

It was a man, but he was covered so completely, it would have been easy to believe he was a cyborg.

"You should get farther back, Ennis," Firo said to his wife next to him, sounding exhausted. "We've got a new nutjob out there." Then he turned to his other side and directed a question at Angelo. "So. Who's the jerk who just walked out of a video game?"

"...There were two of them at the restaurant they attacked earlier. I got rid of one, but...this guy looks new."

"Meaning there's at least one more?"

"Yeah, a little girl who looks like she should go back to her stuffed animals. You met her just a minute ago."

What? "A minute ago"... Does he mean the girl in the Gothic Lolita dress?

Firo wanted to ask for more details, but now wasn't the time. If they left the café, they'd get picked off, but they couldn't stay holed up in there, either.

When he took another look out the window, the man with the night vision goggles was pacing back and forth along the railing in front of the boutique, monitoring them, and ducking out of sight from time to time.

Should they beat a temporary retreat out the back door or take the man out here? Firo decided to let Angelo make that call.

Either way, he was planning to send Ennis out the back door to safety.

Just then, as the pressure to make a rapid decision mounted—Angelo's cell phone suddenly vibrated.

He took the phone out of his jacket, saw that it was the demolition guy, and answered immediately.

"Heya, Mr. Angelo. How's it going?"

"You're already watching this from somewhere anyway, aren't you? You think we're going to be all right?"

"Nah, it looks like you're in deep shit. And why's the casino guy from yesterday with you?"

"Tell you later. If you can't back me up, you're wasting my time. I'm hanging up." As Angelo talked, he took cover behind the wall.

The demolition guy gave a coarse laugh, then offered a solution. *"Backup, huh? Basically, you need somebody to shut down ole Goggles on the fourth floor, right?"*

"Can you?"

"Yeah, there's no civilians around, so if I go right now, I can do it."

"...What?"

As Angelo listened to his buddy cackling away, a terrible premonition ran through him. “Hey, wait, don’t tell me you’re going to—”

“I set these puppies up all over the boat. Have fun watching ‘em run around in a panic, boss!”

Immediately afterward, the call ended—

And a powerful explosion roared through the shipboard atrium.

Although nothing seemed to be on fire, the blast wind swept past Firo’s group as well.

The open center of the mall served as an echo chamber for the roar. A few passengers had been frozen nearby, paralyzed by the sound of the gunshots, and now they were falling over each other in their haste to get back to their cabins or out on deck. They just wanted to get as far away from the mall as they could.

When Firo cautiously peeked out through the thick smoke, he saw that the area around the fourth-floor boutique had collapsed, cutting off access to the corridor at the rear. The man in the night vision goggles was gone.

Either he was under the rubble, or he’d retreated into the corridor and couldn’t get back out.

For a short while after the explosion, the guns in the shopping mall fell silent. Maybe the other Mask Makers had temporarily retreated, too. Even when Firo stuck his head out, nobody shot at him.

Just in case, he retreated into the café, then turned to Angelo. “Hey... Was that your pal who called just now? What the hell did he do?”

Angelo was gripping the phone so hard he seemed likely to shatter it, and his voice was furious. “He says don’t worry; he’s planted bombs like that all over the ship.”

“...Mind if I deck your friend later?”

“Maybe after I’ve shot him first.”

As the gunman answered, his face was expressionless. Firo had nothing to say to that, and he turned back to the mall again.

And then—

“What the... Charon?!”

—on the lowest floor of the mall, where the gunshots had fallen silent, the gear monster was running toward the shark robot, which had been abandoned in front of the fountain.

“That idiot! He’s gonna get himself killed!”

Without thinking, Firo dashed outside. Angelo and Ennis called after him.

“Hey!”

“Firo!”

But Firo didn’t stop running. He circled around the fountain and grabbed the shoulder of the Gear, who was reaching into the shark’s mouth.

“Charon, what are you doing?! It’s not safe out here; hurry up and—”

At that, the Gear costume flinched and gave a small shriek. “F-Firo!”

Huh? That’s...not Charon’s voice...

And then Firo saw it.

Beyond the Gear’s outstretched hands, deep inside the shark robot’s big mouth, he could make out the slight figure of a girl.

“Wha...? What’s going on? Hey, are you okay?!”

What’s a girl doing in here?!

Hastily, Firo reached in and pulled the girl out of the shark’s jaws.

Carefully picking her up so that she wouldn't hurt herself on the shark's teeth, he gently set her down below the robot.

"Are you okay?"

"H-hey, you okay?!"

Firo and the Gear yelled at the exact same time, and at that point, Firo was positive that whoever was beside him, it wasn't Charon.

The girl must've been stunned by the noise of the explosion; she was staring vacantly at Firo and the Gear.

"The shooting could start back up any second now. C'mon, we're taking her over there."

Scooping the girl up in his arms, Firo sprinted back toward the café.

Whoever was in the Gear costume followed him and slid into the building.

Firo laid the girl down in the back of the café, and Angelo and Ennis came over.

For some reason, Angelo's eyes were wide with shock. Firo hadn't thought he was even capable of such an expression; he wondered what was up, but—

"Ngh, nnngh..."

The shaken girl's mind was clearing up, so for now, he made her his top priority.

"Hey, pull yourself together," he said.

However, the girl looked past Firo. Her eyes widened, and then—

"Angelo! Oh, oh, Angelo! It really is you!"

—she bolted to her feet and clung to the man.

As he watched the scene play out, the boy inside the Gear thought:

Huh? Wh-what? What's going on? Who's the big guy...? Um...

Then he remembered why the girl had been on the ship in the first place.

That's right; she said she was looking for her father figure or something...

S-so that's him? That wild-looking dude?

He couldn't process this situation. His eyes were swimming with confusion, but when he heard what Angelo said next, he was more confused than he'd ever been in his life.

"No... Why...?"

"I'm so glad... I'm so glad you're okay, Angelo!"

Eyes still wide, Angelo hugged the trembling girl's shoulders tightly—

And his voice was still full of disbelief as he revealed a certain fact.

A fact that shocked Firo and Ennis as well.

"Why...?"

"Why are you here, boss?!"



The bridge

"Captain! Why aren't you responding to— What the...? Ah..."

The masked men pointed their guns at the crew member who'd just entered the room.

"Look, this isn't a roach motel. If you people don't knock it off, we're gonna run out of room to put your tied-up carcasses. Got it?"

It had been just a bit over five minutes since the report that a gunfight had broken out.

Crew members who didn't know about the situation on the bridge had been coming to the captain's room, one after another, only to become new hostages.

The ship's channels of communication were in chaos, and the fact that they couldn't send messages to the outside world had spurred on their panic.

"I tell ya, we had the communications room shut off satellite transmissions, which is great, but... It's not gonna be too much longer before we can't keep this situation under wraps."

The masked man heaved an exhausted sigh.

Beside him, the bound captain growled angrily, "You frauds. You said you wouldn't lay a finger on the passengers."

"We haven't shot any passengers dead *yet*, and we're not planning to. We were just trying to get rid of a dangerous individual who brought a gun on board. We're helping you here."

The man scoffed, and the captain went on cursing him internally.

Averting their eyes from their enraged hostage, the masked men lazily conversed among themselves.

"Still. This coulda gone better."

"Who'd have thought that gunslinger bastard would chase us all the way here?"

"Yeah... I wasn't there; is this the guy who killed Death?"

"How'd he know we'd be on this ship? He brought his gun on with him and everything."

"Dammit, I knew it. We lost because we didn't have Hannibal Lecter. Or Anthony Hopkins. That's definitely it."

“If Dr. Lecter was here, though, he’d eat us up.”

“First, he’d take our spotlight, and then he’d take our lives.”

They didn’t seem as worried as they should be, and the conversation seemed about to continue in this vein for a while yet, but—

“...Is it true that Illness was over there, too?”

“Yeah, although I hear she ran off.”

“I see. Well, she’s unarmed right now anyway.”

Voice turning serious, the man who’d first gotten the weapons from Life issued orders to his surrounding companions.

“Go call Illness. Tell her to suit up... No, she can stay in her street clothes; just give her a weapon. Have her go pin down that gunman.”

“Even when Life’s having trouble with him?” asked one of the hijackers uneasily. He hadn’t been involved in the restaurant assault the other day.

The first man had been on the scene when Death and several of his other companions were killed, and he smirked unpleasantly behind his mask.

“Our badass gunslinger’s a bit old-fashioned, see. Apparently, he doesn’t kill women or children.”



A few minutes later Illness’s cabin

“Hey, Illness! Are you asleep, you idiot?!”

After failing to reach Illness on her radio, one of the Mask Makers finally opened the door with a master key he’d brought from the bridge.

“Yo, Illness! It’s your...turn...?”

Inside, he saw a boy sitting in a chair, with three other boys tied up in front of him.

The sight was actually rather unsettling, and the man flinched. “Who the hell are you?! How’d you get in here?” he shouted at the children. “You’d better not be friends of those stowaways!”

At the word *stowaways*, the boys looked at one another, wondering what was up, but—

“Who’re you, mister? So, um, I was at the pool? And this lady said I should come play with her!” The boy who seemed to be the youngest of the group explained with an innocent smile. “And then, um, Miss Ill said *she was gonna play with these kids later*, so I have to watch them.”

“She what...?”

“And if I do, she says she’s gonna give me a reeeally neat reward afterward! Just for me!”

It wasn’t clear what exactly the man was imagining, but he ground his teeth.

“Th-that little brat. I knew she was sick, but this is just fucked-up!” he growled. “Too bad, kids! Playtime’s over, so run on back to your mommies!”

The man untied the boys, one after another, then shoed them out of the room.

“That bitch left her radio in here...! Not only that, but the damn thing’s turned off!”

Glancing at the howling man out of the corner of his eye, Czes followed the other boys out of the room.

The stowaways were running wordlessly down the hall, but Czes caught up to them and told them gravely, “I don’t know what’s going on, but it’s bad. For now, we need to run for it.”

“Huh...?”

“If you don’t want to die, you should probably choose your next steps carefully. If my room will do, you’re free to borrow it.”

Czes didn’t sound like a child at all anymore, and Tall yelled at him, bewildered.

“Y-you aren’t just acting like a grown-up, you’re kinda acting like an actual grown-up!”

“That wasn’t even a real sentence, Tall.”

“Shut up, Troy! You’re Fake Mature Guy the First!”

“Aww, don’t fight, you guys.”

Still yelling whatever they wanted to, the boys chose to run away for the moment, following Czes.

As Czes hurried ahead at the head of the group of boys, he heaved a deep internal sigh.

I knew it. I had a bad feeling about all this. There was that damned village last year, too. Nothing good has happened since we hit the twenty-first century!

He’d felt something was very wrong ever since he boarded the ship. It was probably entirely linked to the present situation, he thought—
—and a chill ran down his spine again.

...?

What is it?

There’s still something...creepy. I can’t shake it. Something’s off...

No, forget it.

Shaking his head and telling himself it was all in his head, he just ran for now. He would do what he could. He'd hide the boys in his cabin, then meet up with Firo and Ennis.

With no time to even think about what he stood to gain or lose—Czes just followed his instincts and took a step into the bullet-ridden fray.

He had no way of knowing what lay in store for him.



A few minutes later

As the people on the ship felt uneasy about the gunshots that were echoing from somewhere on board—

—suddenly, out of nowhere, a man's coarse voice sounded from every speaker on the vessel.

"Okay, okay, okay, attention, all passengers, this is an impromptu shipboard announcement. English only. There will be no foreign language dubbing or subtitles, so those of you who don't speak English, just watch the visuals and enjoy. So, yeah, we're a mysterious group of seajackers; it's a pleasure to make your acquaintance. We've got everything from brassieres to missiles—no airplanes, alas, but I hope you can forgive us for that. As far as you passengers are concerned, our objectives and true identities are a total mystery! How's that? You havin' fun yet?"

The man sounded strangely worked up about all this, and most people still suspected this was part of director John Drox's event.

However, deep down, due to the gunshots and other noise that had been going on for the past few minutes, everyone knew.

This wasn't an event or a joke.

Even so, they wanted to believe.

They wanted to think that their voyage was safe, if nothing else.

But after the little demonstration that came next, that illusion was easily shattered far too easily.

"Okay, okay, okay. If I laid out all the details, like the bombs all over the ship or the poison gas we could launch at any time, I don't think it would feel all that real to you, the passengers. So if I may, allow me to show you some quick proof that we have indeed hijacked your ship. Right, this is where you applaud! ...Now then, members of the audience! Take a look out your windows! Those on the port side, look to your left; those on the starboard side, look right! I'm telling you, ladies and gentlemen, to look at the sides of the damn boat, so get the lead out and look, maggots, if you'd be so kind!"

Swinging wildly between courtesy and rudeness, the voice giving the broadcast issued directions to the audience with increasing enthusiasm.

Then, when the people looked out the windows as they'd been instructed—

"H-hey! Over there."

"That's... Aren't those the lifeboats?!"

The boats hung from the sides of the ship, suspended by dedicated cranes, and every one of them was being lowered, empty, into the ocean.

That sight was enough to trigger a panic all by itself, but the showman on the PA had even more stunts in store for them.

“Okay, okay, and now it’s time for some fireworks! It’s not quite dark out, but your wild applause is appreciated all the same!”

And then—

—as the boats drifted back along the starboard and port sides, lights wreathed in smoke arced out toward them from somewhere on the ship—

Flash

Boom

Light

Fire

—And flames.

Two lifeboats, one each on the right and left, were shot and exploded into blazing infernos.

The remaining boats were also drifting away on the waves, never to return.

This was all the information the passengers—the audience—had been given.

What sort of weapon was that? How many people were involved? What was the culprits’ objective? They couldn’t even begin to answer such questions.

But what they’d just seen was far more than enough to let them understand their situation.

“And so, passengers and members of the crew, we ask that you refrain from wandering around without permission. Please stay in your cabins or workstations and behave. Oh, and before I forget—

several of us are in among you, blending with the audience, so let the paranoia fest begin.”

Then, a few seconds after everyone had managed to process the situation completely—

—screams echoed through the city on the ocean.



The bridge

After the detailed PA announcement, they wrapped up their rather grudging notice of their takeover. It wasn't very good, as far as announcements went, but as far as they were concerned, this seajack had always been nothing more than a bargaining chip for their real targets on the *Exit*. As long as they had an escape route, they didn't feel they needed to handle this all that carefully.

Although their actions were hardly professional, the masked men didn't seem worried. Maybe this was more their style anyway.

“See, the truth is, we didn't actually want to pull something like this. Hey, don't worry; we're not out to massacre the passengers. Worst case, the company that operates the ship might go a little bankrupt trying to compensate for damages. Ha-ha-ha,” one of the Mask Makers muttered with a smirk behind his mask, switching off the shipboard PA.

The bound captain ground his teeth wordlessly.

The masked man saw him, spread his arms contentedly, and shook his head.

“If you're going to hold a grudge, hold it against the badass gunman and his friends who happened to be on this boat. I know we don't have room to talk, but I do wonder how he got those weapons on

board. I mean, there's no way the security around here could be *that* bad, huh?"

"Silence! You monsters... You're not planning to massacre everyone? How can you say that with a straight face?! You just set the lifeboats adrift?!"

"Nah, we're not planning to sink the ship or anything. We've got a way off the ship for later, too. If anybody starts a rebellion, though—The people in that area might find some very mysterious smoke coming through their vents."

"You goddamned...!"

But the captain's curses went in one ear and out the other. The man just switched on his two-way radio, humming as he did so.

"Heeey, communications room. It's about time to contact the *Exit*. Can you open the satellite comm link again but only to that ship?"

"Oh yeah, like it's that easy... But not impossible, and if everything's going according to plan over there, they should be doing the same thing."

"Good to know we can count on our staff."

Then, after a short wait, the man got a call on his radio: *"Patching you through now."* He stopped humming and picked up his cell phone.

"All right. Let's find out how Aging's doing."

Cheerfully hitting the speed-dial button on his phone, he waited for the call to go through the satellite link, and then—

"Yeah. Speaking."

"Hey! Aging! How're things on the *Exit*? We had a bit of trouble on this end, but the ship's safely under our control now."

Brazenly leaving out the business with Angelo, the masked man made his report.

On the other end of the call, Aging guffawed. *“Oh yeah? That’s great! I tell ya, you folks wouldn’t believe the party we’re having over here!”*

“Good for you. How’s everybody doing?” the man asked, envious of his comrades. *Aw, man. Did it all go like clockwork on their end, and they’re taking turns going to the casino or something?*

Apparently having a grand old time, the voice on the other end of the line replied, *“Yep, the president’s hanging in there, just barely! Everybody else is dead!”*

“I see, I see, come to think of it, the president was over there, t—” The beginnings of a smile froze on his face. “What?”

“The only ones still alive are me and the president! *How’s that for a situation? What a blast, huh?*”

“Hey, whoa, hold on a minute.”

Breaking out in a cold sweat, the man calmly tried to parse the information he’d been given.

Due to the fact that the president would also be on the *Exit*, the sister ship, they’d assigned a larger group to it.

And that group was all dead? What kind of joke was this?

“Hang on... Don’t tell me you sold us out, took the president hostage, and killed them all yourself.”

“That wouldn’t have been nearly as much fun. Maybe it’s ’cause Death bought the farm a little while back, and he’s pulling the rest of us into the grave after him! Gwah-ha-ha-ha!”

“Hold it! What is it?! What happened?! Did you have Steven Seagal or Jet Li or somebody on board over there?! Or did *those guys* catch on before you started the operation?!”

“Nah, I imagine the ones we’re after still haven’t tumbled to the fact that we’re here. Besides, even if they did, massacring everybody in a preemptive strike isn’t their style.”

He was missing something; none of his guesses were right. As his anxiety mounted, the masked man peppered the other party with more questions.

“Then what?! Did you get attacked by a tentacle monster like in *Deep Rising*?!”

“No, no, it’s— Well, let’s see... In terms of those movies you folks love so much...”

Aging was apparently thoroughly enjoying the situation—

—but the rest of that sentence shocked the team on the *Entrance* and plunged them into terror.

“Maybe two hundred zombies, couple Jasons, couple Freddys. That’s about the size of it! Gah-ha-ha!”



A shipboard corridor

Illness was running.

She didn’t know where to. She just ran and ran.

“Hmph! I’m ‘useless,’ am I?! If we’re not up against the police, then it’s not my job! I won’t help them no matter what! They can just go let the gunman shoot them!” She understood most of what was happening on the ship. She’d seen the exploding lifeboats, too, from an exterior corridor. “Honestly! I can’t believe them! Don’t give me that crap about how seajacks should be cool! This is awful! If they ruin all the lifeboats, how is Claudia’s group supposed to get away?!”

She was running as her emotions dictated, not bothering to hide her anger at her companions, but she didn't have any particular destination in mind. For now, she'd just run around until she bumped into someone she knew, and then she'd decide what to do based on who it was.

Oh, I wonder if Claudia's okay.

I've got to do something about Mr. Gunman.

Is Czes safe?

Are those stowaway kids still on the run?

Argh, what am I supposed to do?! What do I do?!

It's all their fault! All of it!

Illness decided that if she ran into a Mask Maker, the first thing she'd do would be to land a dropkick on their face.

The cell phone she wore at her waist vibrated, and she slowed to a halt for a moment.

Come to think of it, I guess I left my radio in my room, she remembered. She hid around a corner of the corridor and pressed the TALK button.

The fact that the number was withheld concerned her a bit, but any calls to this phone had to be from a Mask Maker.

Illness sucked in a deep breath, then put the phone to her ear, intending to really let them have it.

However—

—as it turned out, it was a while before she let that breath out.

“...Death is a neighbor to be feared.”

“ ”

Her breathing stopped.

“...Life is kin to be dreaded.”

“ _____ ”

Time stopped.

“...Agony abides with light...fury and shame dwell in shadow...in their illustrious presence, I simply...consume a single leaf from the garden...”

“ _____ !”

The girl was hyperventilating now, and before she managed to get her breathing under control, she dashed the cell phone against the wall.

“No...”

Before her breathing returned to normal, all she could manage were screams.

“No, no, no, no, no, oh, oh, oooooh...! ...oh.....Nooooonono! No! NooooOOooooOooo, wh—...? Why...? Wha...? Why...?”

Those were the only words she could form.

As she began breathing again, acid welled up heavy and thick from the depths of her throat, and she spat it out.

She hadn't eaten anything for a while, but the pure bile forced its way up and out of her mouth.

The string of words she'd heard over the phone had been like a prose poem.

What did it mean to her?

Illness staggered a few steps, then crumpled to the floor and burst into terrified tears.

She sounded like a child, younger than ten, who'd lost her parents and started wailing with panic.

But those cries only blended into the rest of the commotion on the ship. They reverberated off the walls, over and over, then vanished.

There in that lonely hallway, her despair echoed around her with no one to hear.





Gunslinger Demolition guy And their boss

The young stowaways

The Mask Makers Illness Life

Movie star Stuntman Director and staff

And a family of immortals who'd only wanted to enjoy their voyage.

With all these people aboard, the ship pressed forward.

It was an enormous, wide-open prison cut off from the world...

...and with everyone's thoughts and emotions trapped inside, it simply sped over the ocean, sending screams echoing across the water, far and wide.

And as for where the ship would lead them...

Interlude

“No... What? ...What is this...? The lifeboats exploded... This is a joke, right?!”

“.....?!”

“H-hello?! Hello?! Is that you, Misao?!”

“Hi... Hiroko! Hiroko? Thank God... I finally got through...”

“Yes! Okay, I-li-li-listen! The ship! The ship I’m on is...”

“Listen to me, Hiroko.”

“Wait, now isn’t the time...”

“Listen to me!”

“Ngh...!”

“I’m sorry for yelling... Listen, get away from that ship right now.”

“Huh... Wha-what...? Why...? Do—do you know what’s going on over here?!”

*“You have to run... You have to run... Aah, aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa
aa
aaah!”*

“What the...? Misao? Misao?! What was that, just now...? An explosion?”

“AAAaaaaaaah, I think—I think we’re done for over here! I don’t know whether that ship’s safe or not. They might be over there with you, too! The only thing I know for sure is you have to get away from that ship right now! You have to! Just run, just run, just run, hurry, hurry, hurry!”

“Calm down... Misao, calm down!”

Fear death Fear death

*“The ship is— It won’t be tomorrow night, we— We’ll get to you
Dread life Dread life
sooner! The bastards are speeding up, damn them! We can’t stop!
Your own flesh accepts death Your own heart wishes for death
Goddammit, we’re finished! They’re monsters! All of them! Shit, I
Yet still you live, O noble goats
don’t know what’s going on! ”*

*“What’s the matter?! Tell me what happened! What are those
voices, Misao?!”*

*“It’s a bunch of lunatics on the PA, but that doesn’t matter now!
Listen, this ship—! We’re gonna—! We’re gonna crash into you
tomorrow evening! The bastards are planning to ram us into you, no
matter what!”*

“Huh...?”

*“I don’t know what’s going to happen to me, but let me say this
now, one last time, Hiroko, I— Ah, aaah, what—what are you
people...?! Dammit! Hiroko! Run! Get off that ship—”*

“Misao... Misao?!”

Quell the soul that is to be devoured Worship pain Our god is...

“

”

*“Misao, Misaoooooo! No, what is this...? What’s—what’s going on?!
No... No... NOOOOOOooooooooooooOO!”*

To be continued in Baccano! 2002 [Side B]

Digression A

And as the chaos unfolded...

...someone was watching from some undisclosed location, typing a singsong soliloquy into the memo pad of a cell phone.



My name is Copycat.

Nothing but a mimic.

Just a humble criminal.

Come, let's repeat it, repeat it.

Let's do it all over again.

I've prepared a garden of bullets.

This place is sure to be smoke-stained soon.

Let's have ourselves a bloody Sabbath.

The sacrifices are ready already.

They should get to us soon.

They should hit us soon.

Let's make two ships into one.

Let's stew an ocean of despair.

My name is Copycat.

Nothing but a mimic.

Just a humble criminal.

But what to copy? No, not the individuals.

No, not actions, either.

What I should mimic are malice and coincidence.

When I've copied coincidence, what will I become?

Will I be a copy of God?

If so, then let's create a world.

Let's reproduce it, recreate it.

Let's reenact a world.

Let's reproduce that luxury train.

Let's reproduce that utterly isolated world.

However, there is no hope here.

No hope in the bullet garden.

The source of that hope, Isaac and Miria, can't catch up to the ship this time.

We've never met, but they aren't on board this time.

All right, let's reproduce it, let's recreate it.

Let's reenact despair alone.

If it goes well, I'll clap quietly.

It's for me, all for me.

My taunting little rhythm.

Tmp-ta-ta ta-tmp ta-ta-ta-ta ta-ta-ta

AFTERWORD

Hello, Ryohgo Narita here.

Starting with this volume, we're finally getting into the 2000 era arc in earnest.

In *2001*, the stage was an enclosed, isolated village, so I figured I'd set this volume in a wide-open space and my first reflex was: "Wide-open space... The ocean!" —And here we are.

This volume is a wild dance between characters who seem both new and familiar. Since it's *2002*, I may experiment with this and that, and the atmosphere may be different from the *1930s*, but it's the same old crazy ruckus at heart, and I hope you enjoy it.

And this summer— They finally started airing the *Baccano!* anime!

After the drama CD and the manga, it finally feels as if it's truly come as far as it possibly can, and the quality's so good it makes me glad I've kept writing *Baccano!* this long!

The CDs for the opening and ending themes, a new drama CD, and a *1931* manga with characters who weren't in the original... *Baccano!* projects are under way in all sorts of places, even some that are entirely out of my hands. I hope you'll have fun with them, right along with the original!

In addition, they're finally making a *Baccano!* game! And preorders are already open!

It's a visual novel version of *1931* with multiple endings, made for the Nintendo DS. It has several dozen endings and *What if?* routes, and it looks like it's going to be a really solid game. I wrote what works out to more than a hundred book pages of new scenario for the game, too. For more information, visit *Dengeki hp*!

* Thank-yous follow.

To my supervising editor, Wada (Papio), for whom I caused an astronomical amount of trouble again, as well as Chief Editor Jasmine and Supervising Chief Editor Suzuki, the printer, and everyone in the publishing department. I really am incredibly sorry...

To Reichi Saegusa, Ichiro Sakaki, Makoto Sanda, and Yuu Fujiwara, who cheered me on and gave me all sorts of advice as I wrote. Thank you very much!

To the other friends, acquaintances, and writers who helped me out.

To Katsumi Enami, who designed lots of new characters and expanded the *Baccano!* world even further.

To Director Omori and the rest of the anime staff and Ginyuu Shijin, who drew the manga version, for boosting my mood.

And to all the readers who still picked up this book, even though it's set in a different era.

Thank you so much!

September 2007

“Feeling like I’m gonna die, what with this and that” Ryohgo Narita

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